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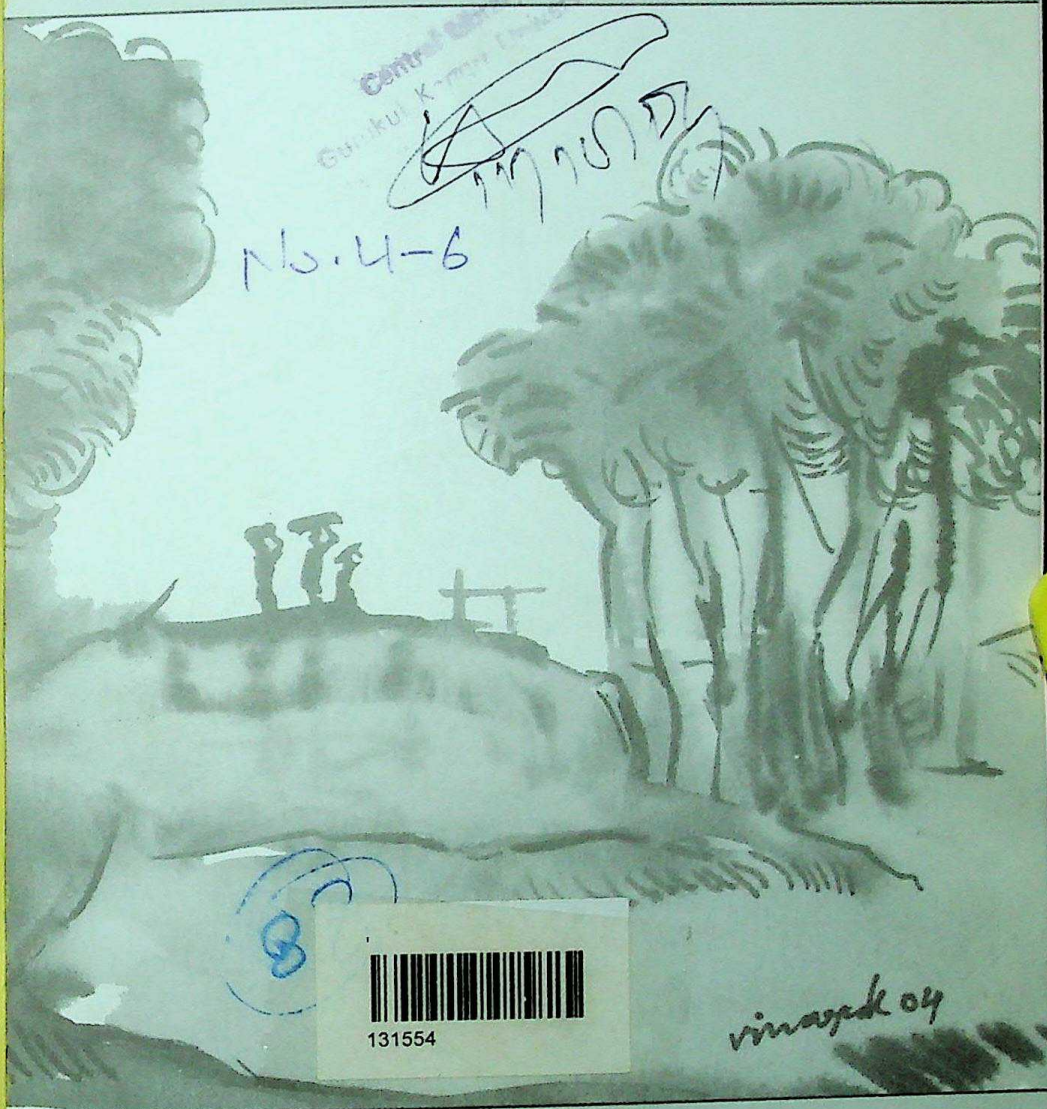

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HIGHLIGHTS

In Memoriam: Nirmalprabha Bordoloi

Dom Moraes

Akademi Award-winning Writings: 2003

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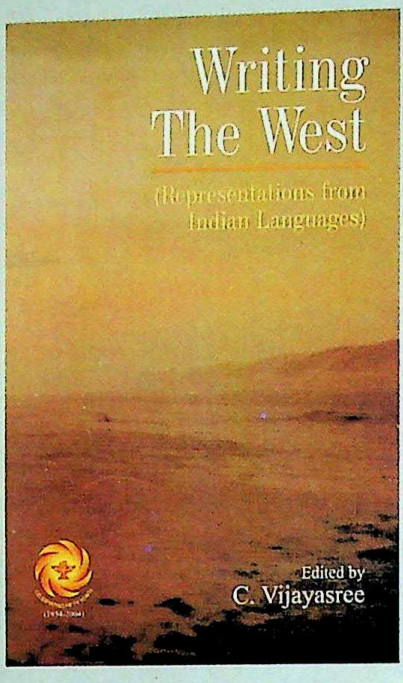

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Dear Reader

Sahitya Akademi awards are considered nationally and even internationally prestigious, and it is not for nothing that they have become so. As Dilip Chitre, Chief Guest of this year's awards presentation ceremony, said, "Today there are other awards with larger amounts of money attached to them, but none of them surpass the importance attached to the Sahitya Akademi awards by the community of Indian writers themselves; and the best thing that can be said about the achievement of the Sahitya Akademi in the last five decades of its existence is that it has created a sense of pan-Indian, pluri-lingual community among us. Today, we recognize Indian literatures in the plural and Indian literature in the singular as a distinct entity, and the outside world too takes note of our unique singularity in plurality. This plurality that is unique to our heritage and still holds us together is reflected in the secular democratic Constitution of India. That our Republic has survived for 54 years has helped institutions such as the Sahitya Akademi to emerge and evolve up to the present. Today we have begun to believe that it is possible for Indian literatures to cohere, and in that coherence we find the possibility of an Indian literature or a South Asian Literature with open frontiers, and co-existing in a non-hierarchical, harmonious order."

Wise words, indeed! It is to illustrate Sri Chitre's well-founded optimism that we have dedicated this issue to this year's Akademi Award-winning writings, garnishing them with excerpts from the speeches delivered by the writers on recieving the award. And yet, we could not make it exclusive, as we had to devote sad pages in memory of Dom Moraes and Nirmalprabha Bordoloi. Dom Moraes was perhaps the most endearing, most enigmatic and most controversial Indian English poet of our times. Sankarlal Bhattacharjee writes a touching article on him which is part reminiscences and part evaluation.

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I have enjoyed a very special relationship with Nirmalprabha Bordoloi for the last 20 years. I used to call her Bai-deo, which in Assamese means Didi or elder sister. She was a wonderful lyricist and her entire being was steeped in her poetic persona. I have had innumerable occasions to spend time with her at Guwahati, Kolkata, Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Puri and various places of the Northeast.

Nirmalprabha-baideo was mild-mannered by nature, but if provoked beyond endurance, she could be tough as steel. Almost five decades ago, when Assamese society was steeped in orthodoxy and conservatism, she demonstrated how a young woman can rise in revolt against male oppression and come out of a loveless marriage. Under the guidance of a liberal father, she brought up her daughter all alone and gave her proper education so that she is today established as an accomplished geologist holding a high position in the government. Side by side, Nirmalprabha herself worked hard and obtained the highest degrees of the university for herself and rose to be the Jawaharlal Nehru Professor in the Assamese Department of the Gauhati University. The grit and determination to earn respect and recognition in the society was evenly counterpoised by the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling in poetry.

I last met Nirmalprabha Bordoloi early this year when she came to Delhi for an operation. Her eyesight was failing and she had other complications. I received the last letter from her three months back. She would always write affectionately in hand in almost immaculate Bengali. There was a distinct premonition in her last letter as she inquired after her poetry anthology in English translation to be published by the Akademi with a nostalgic assertion, "I cannot even die before it sees the light of day." Well, she had to. Perhaps all great works always remain unfinished.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

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Death and Departure: Meeting Dom Moraes

Sankarlal Bhattacharjee

These are the first six lines of a poem "Figures in the Landscape" — from Dom Moraes' first book of poems *A Beginning*—

> 'Dying is just the same as going to sleep,'
> The piper whispered, 'close your eyes,'
> And blew some hints and whispers on his pipe:
> The children closed their eyes.
>
> And gravely wandered in a private darkness,
> Imagining death to be a way of looking.

I had nearly forgotten these lines from his first book when I met Dom in Kolkata in the last year of his life and asked why his travels in a fractured land, meaning India, put into a book *Out of God's Oven* had to begin with a chapter called "Leaving London." Dom, as usual sucking at a long cigarette precipitously dangling from his lips, smiled and said as he shakily autographed my copy of the book: "Since it's all about displacement. Imagining departure as a way of looking."

I still cannot figure out why that afternoon every now and then we came round to talking about death and departures. One reason of course was the beautiful paragraph he had written of his father's departure and death in the aforesaid essay on London. But the other, and more important, reason could have been his infor-

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mation, which he hid from me, that his days were numbered. He, it seemed, didn't mind that we talked so little about the book *Out of God's Oven* and so much of its opening essay, which brought out with such poignancy his estrangement from the one city he could have called his own. When I asked why his father decided to live his last years in London he uttered the very same sentence he had written in the essay: " I haven't the faintest idea." And then he put a very pointed question: "Why do you ask me to repeat something I have already said in my writing?" To which I replied: "Because I like to listen to you endlessly quoting from yourself. You never fail to do it."

Dom, I'm sure, did not fail to notice in this repartee the great admiration I bore for the style and content of his ouevre, which was seeing himself, through himself, in and out of himself, and always himself. The entire corpus of his writing, combining both verse and prose, add up to a loosely structured autobiography, which also, significantly, offers a rollicking script of his time and place. Everything Dom wrote ended up in autobiography and all talk of death and departures eventually veered to his own death and displacement.

We may first consider the lines he writes about his father. His father Frank, who was very Indian and very successful in his career as a journalist, on retirement chose to spend the rest of his days by himself in London surrounded by memories, memorabilia and his son's books. He lived just two years. Dom writes: "Whenever I have visited London after my father died, I have gone to look at the house where he last lived. This is a rather grand house in a Bayswater Square. I look at the house for a while through the taxi window, before I ask the puzzled driver to go on. It is the only monument left to my father's loneliness."

I asked Dom if he had plans to retire to somewhere before dying. Strange, even after this he did not disclose that he was fast dying and that it was far too late in the day to plan a final transit camp. Instead he said two very charming things; one: he wouldn't mind dying among the aborigines of New Guinea and, two: though not in any athletic fitness, he was still doing a lot of running around. This running around turned out to be his hectic travels in northern and western India to dig up material for his book with Sarayu Srivatsa on Thomas Coryate's historic walk from England to India in the

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year 1613. So Dom, who a few years ago on a certain Sunday had watched London, once his city, pass by with detached sadness, was back again in Odecombe in Somerset to launch his book *The Long Strider* shortly before his death. On hindsight I get a feeling that he hid his fatal ailment not to stop me from bringing up themes like death, dirge and derangement.

Addicts of Dom's prose, pieces journalistic or artistic, laced as they are with superb humour and pinch, would hardly suspect the depth and horror of the pain from which it all emerged. Born into a family with a much preoccupied and largely absentee father and an insane and violent mother Dom had all the classic ingredients of an autobiographical novel at hand when he started out into poetry. In all his life he wrote just one novel, which he regretted having written at all. But he spread his life's experiences generously over all his poetry and much of his personal prose, which share a subtle archaeological activity—digging of the mind. Like poetry in his tender boyhood (he reminisces in "Leaving London": "I was by now going to school, which helped keep me out of her way. But I had now also started to feel an obscure but powerful need to write poetry. This required that I sit still with a pen and paper in one place, which had of necessity to be my room") wit and humour was an escape from circumstances. Ten years after that brilliant debut (his first collection *A Beginning* earned him the Hawthornden Prize) when he stopped writing poetry for seventeen years his prose grew in journalistic cynicism, but still retained its levity and impish verve. In his last book, *The Long Strider*, I feel he found that serenity of expression that comes with a reasonable escape from self. Dom had harboured the will to write a book on Coryate for fifty years and only launched into it when writing was no more a passion or escape but a job that helped pay the grocer's bills.

Even then Thomas Coryate reflected a part of himself, the Dom without permanent liaisons or address and trammelled with a constant need to keep tramping. Like a lonely traveller as Coryate, Dom too wore a sad face in his last years, which like quite a bit of his poetry and prose, I now find unforgettable.

Besides death and departures Dom spoke a good deal on madness. It began with his caustic remarks about poetry as a form of madness for some and a supple system for others. When I wanted

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to know what it was in his case he kept silent for a while and then made the vague comment that poets would not be half as interesting without some corny features.

I mentioned the genteel and proper Eliot to whom Dom had been to with his earliest poems. "He liked my pieces but said that just twenty poems wouldn't make a book," said Dom, and then added as if to bring the odd part out from under the Eliot image: "Then just when I was fearing that my time was out he enquired if I drank. 'It's five o'clock and I must have my gin.' I said that I'd be only too glad to share his gin. And out came a bottle of Beefeater's from his handbag and we settled down to drinking in his chamber.

"But that was only the beginning of our drinking, for as soon as we had downed the bottle Eliot asked if I'd join him for further booze in the pub. The pub that he took me to turned out a very sleazy one with a very strange mix of clients. The way the crowd kept yelling 'Hi Tom!' rather confirmed that the joint was one of Thomas Stearns' regular haunts. Eliot took me to a far corner and ordered more gin. And then after a couple of glasses suddenly remembered something and said, 'Do walk out to the phone booth and make a call to my wife, tell her we are busy with your poems and that I'd be back soon.'

"When I had said just about this I heard Mrs Eliot from the other end, 'If you are in Tom's office then why do I hear you dropping coins into a box? I know where you are precisely and I want you to tell Tom that if he did not turn up at our doorstep within half an hour then the door will not open for him tonight.' No sooner had I reported this to the great man he fast settled the bill and dashed out of the pub. In his haste, I noticed, he had left behind his valise, which I duly picked and ran after him. By the time I caught up he had hailed a taxi and was describing his route. And then he turned round to say 'goodbye' and saw me holding his bag. 'How come my valise is in your clutch?' He asked, still wondering how had it all happened. 'You had left it behind in the pub', I clarified. He said, 'You ought to have told me that, I would have gone back to collect it.'

"I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say. Eliot then drew his drunken body to its full height and said in his authoritative style, 'Remember, you are a poet, and a poet does not

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carry anybody's bag save his own.' He then went into the cab and vanished in the dark. So that much for your genteel and proper Eliot," said Dom with a crooked smile.

I remembered having seen this smile of his on an earlier meeting – only a few shades wickeder – when I had brought up the topic of Khushwant Singh. We were discussing the flamboyance of the memoirs of poets and I told Dom how Khushwant had reacted to an anecdote given by him in one of his books. It stated that Leela Naidu, then wife of Dom, was helping Khushwant to do some shopping in Hong Kong. Among items Khushwant had to buy were bras for his wife and daughter. As per Dom's version Khushwant did not have the exact sizes of the bras required and cupped his hands over the breasts of the Chinese sales girls and asked for something 'a little larger than yours'. Apparently the sales girl did not take offence and produced exactly what he wanted. It was a good story, Khushwant thought—at his expense.

Dom was still wearing his smile as I recounted Khushwant's grouse and then warmly said, "Of course it's true Khushwant had taken his palms precariously close to the girl's breasts; I had only set them on the skin. Which is very much within the rights of literary recounting. And it's not that Khushwant doesn't know this."

I was still savouring the exquisite Eliot anecdote when Dom spoke again, "You might still want to know if I revisited Eliot. And just in case you do, the answer is 'yes'. But this time with my first book of poems in hand."

I couldn't help asking, "Is it still among your favourite?"

Dom took a sip of coffee and a drag of his long cigarette and looked quizzically at me, "Favourite what?"

"Book of poems," I said.

"No way. They are all rubbish."

"You mean you don't care for any of your many books?" I had to ask.

Then Dom said with classical aloofness: "Whatever be its merit I still am fond of just one of my works: *My Father's Son.*

"But that is prose."

"What's wrong? May be I still like the way it has turned out."

"But it's for your poetry people will best remember you; isn't so?" I reminded him.

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Dom sat silent for a while and then disarmingly conceded: "That's the price you pay for having written poetry that people liked. Nothing else you ever wrote after that can change your image and address."

Dom has described poetry in his short preface to his *Collected Poems 1954-2004* as the hardest and most demanding discipline and a ferocious master. His seventeen years of poetry block, he says, arrived and went away for no apparent reason. The long block he resents as seventeen years of deprivation and he did not want it ever to recur while he was alive. I now find that even as he was trashing his lovely poetry he was still working at it with the last dregs of passion and energy in store to produce those exquisite "New Poems" of 2003-2004. I cannot recall why that afternoon – in between talk of poetry and passion – I put him back to discussing his mother's presence and absence. He said he still had his mother hovering over his memory and invoked her in his poetry. The long last poem (actually a combination of sonnet-like pieces) in *Collected Poems*, titled "After the Operation," begins with such a surrender to the mother image he had fought with all his life:

> From a heavenly asylum, shrivelled Mummy,
> glare down like a gargoyle at your only son,
> who now has white hair and can hardly walk.
> I am he who was not I . ...
> ... ...
> That I'm terminally ill hasn't been much help.
> There is no reason left for anything to exist.
> Goodbye now. Don't try and meddle with this.

In the opening stanza of the third section of the poem Dom rued his imminent death because that would freeze his dialogues with his dead father and his life with Sarayu, his 'closest friend, harshest critic,' to whom *Collected Poems 1954-2004* is dedicated. His lines go:

> Death will be an interruption of my days, of
> all matters pertinent to me, and the private
> intimacies I have that cannot be taken away.
> It will interrupt my talks with my dead father,
> moribund friends, and bent, witchlike trees;

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> And most of all interrupt what I have with her
> who lives and saves me from my lost countries.

Even as we talked of death in the softly lit hotel room and Dom continued to suck his cigarette smoke with trembling lips arrangements were afoot to have him operated upon. He was still hopeful that he would come by a collaborator to work on a translation of Jibanananda Das' poetry. I now feel foolish why I hadn't prodded him more on Jibanananda, another poet obsessed with death and departures. As a result I don't even know what in Jibanananda appealed so much to Dom that he was prepared to give even his last days to translating him. But strangely as it all happens in poetry Dom in the fifth section of "After the Operation" describes an O.T. experience which matches firmly Jibanananda's imagined scene from an autopsy room – "Lash Kata Gharey" (In the Autopsy Room):

> My throat was split open by a surgeon's knife.
> Though he was a pleasant man, whom I liked
> when he took the tumour out, he invaded all
> the private places in my head, and, you, God,
> giggling, watched. I shall choke on my blood
> but not to toast you, monster made by man.

The first time I met Dom I had told him how in late school and early years of college we almost idolized him. To which he replied, "I hope you've gotten over that."

"The phase, yes, but the feeling stays."

"You probably know why I am here in Calcutta with Sarayu?"

I said, "Yes. To shoot a documentary on the city."

To make it more specific Dom added, "But this won't be Dom Moraes' Calcutta 96. It's actually a look at the remains of the Raj—fact-bound and data-displayed as documentaries go."

"So a trip to the Bowbazar Baijis is off the script?" I asked.

Dom replied, "What to do? That's another story, about another city."

"You mean the 'spider city' Calcutta, as you called it in "Gone Away", and this city we are sitting in are two different places?"

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"I'll put it this way: The similarities of the past and present cities are vague, and their realities are vague too. They must be held together by memory."

I asked, "Aren't the memories of two persons of the same thing various too? Like Ved Mehta couldn't remember that knife incident at the Baiji den you described in your book."

Dom had plucked out his cigarette to enjoy a little laugh and then spoke with naïve candour, "But I did meet up with Ved and settled the issue. What I wrote was no story-making and I still stand by it."

I said, "Among the remains of the Raj were the excellent floorshows of Calcutta hotels. Those cabarets too are no more."

"Of course, of course," Dom nodded, "and among the best cabaret dancers ever seen anywhere in India was a girl from here. Luscious Lola."

I cannot describe what joy Dom's complimenting Lola brought me. Lola whom I knew in boyhood as Lauren Swinton and grew up watching practising her steps from my attic window in central Calcutta! I told him this and asked, "Will there be any reference to those long lost cabarets?" And he said, "I am afraid, no." Then casually he put across a query, almost an afterthought: "And where in the world do you think Lola is?"

I said, "Not the faintest idea."

And Dom sadly closed the issue: "'Gone away!"

For the final time I will return to our last meeting at Taj Bengal hotel when Dom had just been through a session of promotion of *Out of God's Oven*. Like I have been saying all along this piece, our conversation simply wouldn't shake out of death or displacement. But Dom did not speak anything of belief, religion or God. His death he was hiding like a private part. Now when I think back on it I seem to know why, since there is textual evidence in the sixth section of "After the Operation":

> Let me situate this poem in time and space.
> It is 15 April 2003; Baghdad has surrendered.
> The dictator may be dead; Bush doesn't know.

At the end of his days Dom Moraes must have been a very resigned

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person. He seemed happy with himself, his lover Sarayu, even with the hordes of hostile memories of his mother and father. I do not know when he gave up believing, but he didn't seem any the worse for it. I hope he nearly knew he was the best ever Indian poet in English. I wish he lived a couple of years more to see the reader's reaction to the ninth part of his last great poem, which ring, ominously close to some parts of Rilke's "Ninth Elegy" of the *Duino Elegies*, where Dom writes:

> History, slow as a sloth, has maintained our race.
> One can savour Hitler's slave camps in a film,
> But Yahweh did not come to comfort or save.
> A towel from Turin shows a fraudulent face.
>
> The creatures I created told me for years
> That we would end as we started, by accident,
> and turn back into the emptiness of the sky.

P.S.

It is now known that on the night before he died, Dom had talked of returning to the Somerset village of Odecombe and even settling there. On July 19, 2004, on Dom's 66th birthday, 26 of his friends attended a simple ceremony in which a tablet was placed near the entrance to the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Odecombe. The 18-inch by 2-ft tablet of Jaisalmer stone read: "Dom Moraes who followed Thomas Coryate's footsteps and returned home." Sarayu, it is stated in the report, sees parallels between Coryate's life and Dom's: "Coryate had to beg for money from (the Emperor) Jehangir and we had to beg for money to complete the book."

The book and Dom's last beautiful poems now complete a lovely, loverly, lonesome life.

❑

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Dom Moraes

Figures in the Landscape

'Dying is just the same as going to sleep,'
The piper whispered, 'close your eyes.'
And blew some hints and whispers on his pipe:
The children closed their eyes

And gravely wandered in a private darkness,
Imagining death to be a way of looking.
The piper seemed to listen with his eyes.
A cry from distant meadows brought them waking

And shook some birds from folds of fields and walls.
Children are birds: they chirped and flew away
Into a country peace as tall as hills.
Even their voices went away

And left an absence: glitter of his loss.
He blew a wavery quittance on the pipe,
Then honked with thumb and finger at his nose
And shuffled off to find a place to sleep.

Waking in lonely fields at break of day
He remembered a dream, looked at the sky
And wondered would a stranger come that way
To take his hand and say, I long to die.

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Letter to My Mother

I

I address you only,
My lonely mother.
Where seven islands squat
In a filthy sea,
You say your rosary.
The seven hills of Rome
Loom daily over the deaths
Of the weepers in the bazaar,
Equally without hope,
In the shape of your home
Which was also on a hill.
My small prosperous grandfather
Built a house there. He died
Mourned by you, from me
Farther even than Rome.
Holy he rode to heaven.
He would be ashamed of me
Who attend to no virgins.
You are not ashamed.
In the corroding sun
You sit alone with your Church
And the memory of the son
You have scarcely ever seen.
You pray he may be spared
For the arms of the blue wife
God raped in an orchard.
You do not understand me.
I am tidying my life
In this cold, tidy country.
I am filling a small shelf
With my books. If you should find me crying
As often when I was a child
You will know I have reason to.
I am ashamed of myself
Since I was ashamed of you.

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II

Your eyes are like mine.
When I last looked in them
I saw my whole country,
A defeated dream
Hiding itself in prayers,
A population of corpses,
Of burnt bodies that cluttered
The slow, deep rivers, of
Bodies stowed into earth
Quickly before they stank
Or cooked by the sun for vultures
On a marble tower.
You pray, you do not notice
The corpses around you.
Sorrow has stopped your eye.
Your dream is desolate.
It calls me every day
But I cannot enter it.
You know I will not return.
Forgive me my trespasses.

Grandfather

Grandfather in the corner keeps no time.
He chafes his nostrils till a single hair
Falls as a bookmark on the unthumbed page.
The leather chair creaks sharply with his breath
From breakfast till we tidy him away
Before we dine, to the sweet fusty air
Of his small prison, through whose window bars
Drawn by the moon, he pokes a feathery head
And tilts his dandruff up towards the stars
And then realizes he is not yet dead.
What is being done to him is not yet done.
He hears the radio say in the next room

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An eagle has escaped from Regent's Park,
And balances back, flapping in the dark,
And sleeps, telling himself this is his home,
Until my children in the morning come.

Grandfather, look. The small gestapo climb
The warped stairs to your cell, and mime
Your weakened, wakened face,
While the denying bird yelps in the clock
And a small pale sun pervades the place.

Typed with One Finger

Travel with me on the long road
into loneliness, where the hours
offer pardons to those still afraid.
Bursts of white and blue flowers
will surprise you in summer, with
denials of what is called death.
When I am not there in the maze
where the long road ends, think
of the clumsy stutter of my limp
behind you always, hindering you,
trying to help you, all my days.

Every word that I wrote was true
this way or that, meant to praise
whatever was worth it on earth.
When my thumb, slowly flexed,
erased vexed lines from your brow,
it did more than my typing finger
achieved in those seasons, for that,
over the endless miles of paper,
scratched in marks like crowsfeet.
And so there were always reasons
how our lives became complete.
For me the main one was I loved you.

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Reconciliations

I

Our darkness started at first day, those days.
Tonight, I'm pleased a few stars can be seen.
The hired car rocks us towards the restaurant,
prompt with its frozen prawns, its rawish pork,
its cindered crepes. Here we shall have to sup.
We've booked for 10, and I've some appetite.
I blend my moist lips with your tilted mouth.
Our tongues entwined, I slurp the honey up
with squelchy sounds, between uneven teeth.

Maybe the restaurant will be more like hell
than usual, and you'll ask why we have come,
but now you are neither raging nor remote.
For the first time in weeks, under my thumb,
through cloth and lace I feel the nipple swell
and a dove murmurs deep inside your throat.

II

Miles under our shoes, magma seethes.
We become the ghosts of our fathers,
not tenants or landlords, but guests
of mirrors that crack in a few years.
We augment new strata, to be sifted
through, gently, by scholars to come,
in centuries to come, who will sadly
wonder if the dead have memories.

My breath will hiss out like a burst drum.
The colour behind my eyes will change,
And what will return is how you stand
in a black petticoat and beige brassiere,

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a comb held in one hand, the other hand
raised like a Hellene statue's to your hair.

III

Where the wind moves with its pardons
over those two by the lake, they also
move in other ways, with their own
pardons and poisons. Over the lake the
wind makes the same sound each tree
makes over and over, the unnecessary
sound it makes for the wind's sake.

And the repeated echoes of sounds are
utterly lost in the leaves as they move
and, become awake and then fall, rustling
as they count the cost of the wind's love.

And in the end, only silence:
the liquid sounds water and wind create
around separate islands.

The Third Truth

The mysteries inherent in your eyes
reveal, when analysed, your life in full,
your selves, which other people recognize:
dutiful hausfrau, but so elegant!
Businesslike, and yet so beautiful!
None of them ever saw how innocent.

This innocence you wore like a white dress
chafed in the end. Which of your selves was true?
You lived with so private a loneliness
nobody saw it was a part of you.

* * *

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The lessons most learn early, you learnt late.
Though you were happy and accepted youth,
you found a truth: fulfillment can frustrate,
and such frustration scalds and overspills.
Made vulnerable, you found a second truth:
Mild pastures lead to harshly wooded hills.

Reference books you took down from a shelf
confused you further, did not help with these
steep climbs you had to make within yourself
to find a third truth, hidden in the trees.

* * *

Now you have taken time off to reflect
upon my structural defects, restore
or redesign me, dearest architect.
Since we are halves of the same entity,
your line will never falter when you draw.
I find myself in you, and you in me.

Perhaps we have misplaced our yesterdays,
and only what we now possess survives.
It seems, though we for years went separate ways,
that we have been together all our lives.

Identity

Some lives ago, the rustle of dry leaves
in autumn weather, was a sound I liked.
No autumns here: I seldom hear it here.

But I was living here, next time I looked.
Inhaled in ruined manors down the road,
my grandsires' excrement defiled my day.

The engineer, the doctor, moneyed men,

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obsequious to their gods until they died.
All that they were, the rain flushes away.

But it still falls on me, not now a child.

* * *

From rain and offices, bodies come back.
At dusk the concrete antheap where I am
shudders awake and switches on its eyes.

To those who pass under the sullen rain
the entire block seems dressed in fireflies
that slowly, after midnight, blink to black.

Others will sleep, exhausted after work.
But electronic rats' eyes round my room,
as my grandsires clutch me in the dark,

burn crimson, for the dark is what I am.

* * *

Somehow the brilliant boy lives in me still.
But my clothes have a smell that I, a boy,
was nauseated by, my grandsires' smell.

Seals at Skye

The first time I saw your body
naked, you showed me a mind
also unclad, equally beautiful.
Once I watched seals off Skye
slide into water and find truth
in an equivalent element, not earth.

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In my time I have seen miracles
I had no words for, blue rocks
off Skye, the grace of the seals
at spring equinox, slipping off
under brittle chips of stars, into
the fact of the ocean, to, survive,

and the great grace of the act when
you slipped off your bra and first
showed me your breasts. That time
lives in me now but then I had no words
for the ripeness of the revealed fruit
nor how your body seemed made of stars.

* * *

Smoothness real in your skin,
sleek seal, your umber, naked
body, undulant in its element,
unguent to the air it swims in,
is made slippery by the viscid
fluids of a truly living woman.

Fragrances of lactose and spice
from moist skin, taut over flesh
firmly shaped, coloured by suns.
After years, a clarity reaches me
found only in your mind. I come
in silence, to take back my voice.

In the spaces of time left to me,
though disoriented by my death,
I breathe, move, listen to the sea.
Your name, the name of a river,
fills my veins until I flow in you.
No child of ours will now be born.

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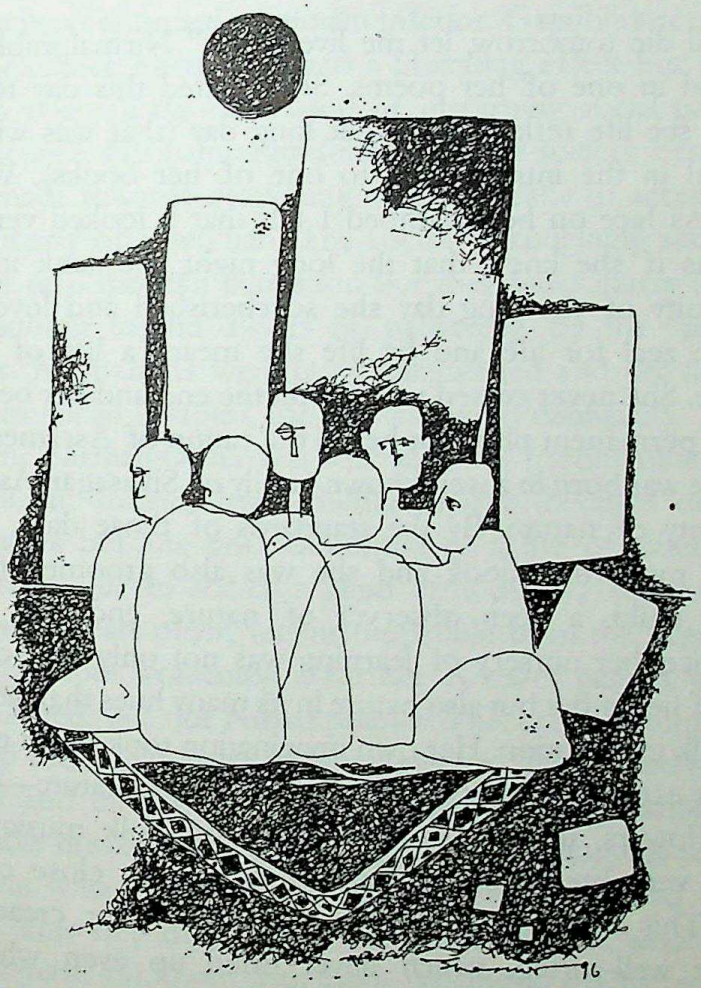
But my voice, reclaimed, slightly
more guttural than it was before,
will now speak your name clearly.
Umber body under mine, utter
my name. There is no more solace.
No more queries. Only you and I.

They will know us only by our names.
But your body will still be made of stars.

(from *Collected Poems 1954-2004*)

❑



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Nirmalprabha Bordoloi: A Romantic Modernist of Assam

Harekrishna Deka

"I will die tomorrow, let me live today," Nirmalprabha Bordoloi said in one of her poems. She wanted this day to be a long one and see life reflected on that long day (that was what she had expressed in the introduction to one of her books). When I saw her lifeless face on her deathbed I felt that it looked very calm and serene, as if she knew that the long night she sunk into was but a continuity of the long day she so cherished and loved. She had immense zeal for life and by life she meant a life of meaningful existence. She never ceased to write till the end and her oeuvre should ensure a permanent place for her in the canon of Assamese literature.

She was born in a well-known family of Sivasagar, Assam, amidst the bounty of nature. By the standards of those days, her parents were of modern outlook and she was also groomed to be so. A sensitive child, a keen observer of nature, endowed with sharp intelligence, her nursery of learning was not only her school or the library of her father but also nature in its many hues that gave pulsation to the folk imagination. Her own imagination took much nourishment from her early encounters with the surrounding nature—trees, rivers, ponds, flowers, undulating lands and from folk music which was like the very breath of an intuitive people in close contact with nature. This metonymic association gave to her creative mind a romantic well-spring, which never dried up even when she left those surroundings to live in an urban setting in her later life.

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Rather, this well-spring helped her to face the paradox of modern existence calmly and provided vital energy to her poetic response to modernism.

Assamese society had already taken a few steps towards modernity before her birth. But certain ossified practices from the past orthodoxy still continued to impact the society in crucial ways in the name of tradition. Such orthodoxy was, of course, not the main-spring of the tradition. Bhakti had an abiding presence in Assamese social life for several centuries through the teachings of Shankardeva, the pioneer of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. The Assamese mind imbibed quite a few democratic social values and a humanistic outlook from the impact of Shankardeva's preachings, and yet clung dearly to many superstitious and worn-out beliefs and customs it carried from the junkyard of ritualistic practices. In a masculine world, women's status continued to remain inferior. Gandhiji's teachings and the Independence movement had a liberating effect but they could not sweep away all the deadwood of disturbing social practices. In her adolescence, Nirmalprabha found that her society, despite all the progress made towards modernity, was not ready to accept fully the personal liberty of a woman. The society grudgingly accepted that girls might take modern education but they must marry at a tender age and submit to the diktats of patriarchy. By the standards of those days, her parents were quite enlightened and yet they had to succumb to social customs for fear of being ostracised. At the age of thirteen, Nirmalprabha was married to a groom much older to her. A brilliant student from childhood, she dreamed of pursuing higher studies but she got committed to a life of utter drudgery and servitude, due to society's blind orthodoxy. Her marriage to a person twenty years older, was incompatible from the beginning, the cruelty of custom worsening it further. A lesser person would have been devastated, but not Nirmalprabha. This crucial moment of her life showed the resoluteness of her character. She decided to confront orthodoxy and be a woman of her own. Her separation from an unreasonable husband was not an impulsive decision but the decision of a person who was conscious of her destiny and had firm belief in herself. This step of hers did not mean that she would not look back to the past. Endowed with a fine sensibility, she had a discerning mind and was quite aware of the living traditions, the sinews that

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kept the Assamese society intact. Being modern did not mean to her that these living sinews of the social fabric had to be forgotten. I mention this crucial episode of her life, since this very step meant that a new woman was born. We would have lost a fine poet, if she had not wrested freedom from the grip of orthodoxy in this manner. The support of her family was crucial for her to take such a step, uncharacteristic of a girl of those days; and this support she received in abundance.

A lyrical impulse was always present in the Assamese folk mind thanks to the affinity of the people with nature. Bhakti added a new dimension to this. Such mingling provided textural richness to the cultural practices of the people. Modernity's advent was inevitable, but it came to this society in a slow pace and no violent disruption from the past tradition happened. There was adjustment of rhythm and absorption of live impulses of the past. I mentioned about a junkyard, but all traditions have their junkyards and each society goes forward by looking beyond this junkyard. In her youthful years, Nirmalprabha found that the Assamese society was ready for such a departure. In Assamese literature, its first manifestations were in Romanticism, the lyrical poetic mind receiving a visionary intensity with fresh impulses brought in by modernity. Nirmalprabha's poetic self grew up in this climate. In her childhood, she was already in communion with nature, but her sensibility was fine-tuned by fresh inputs received from Romanticism. She mentions the live presence of nature in her life repeatedly in her autobiography. Bhakti gave her a cultural icon in Krishna, an epitome of beauty. At one place in her autobiography, she mentions a moment of epiphany, when she appeared to have seen Krishna's eyes vividly; but the way she describes nature in the same breath as Krishna, I feel that her Krishna was none other than an aspect of nature, seen at a moment of intense lyrical vision. When she grew up to be one of the foremost practitioners of modernist poetry, this lyrical vision did not desert her. Modernism gave her a critical outlook and a new axis of observation, but as a seeker of truth, she found in nature her principal metaphors of expression and in that setting, truth and beauty were always interlinked in her visionary mind. She wrote a series of twelve poems on the twelve months of the Assamese calendar to evoke the essential aspects of each month. These were not mere descriptions

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but metaphoric evocations of the succeeding phases of nature in selective images. The poet-persona maintained a critical distance and yet searched for an ideal beauty like a romanticist.

In traditional Assamese folk songs we find that nature provides free similes to the lyrical feeling of the singer. Here the modern poet called up metaphors from the human world to evoke the beauty of nature lyrically. In Assamese Bihu songs, human beauty is compared to that of nature. In Nirmalprabha's poems nature was humanised.

She used to say that there was no greater poetry than life and by life she meant human life. But often she sought correspondence of human life in nature. In one of her poems, the struggle between the storm and the root is symbolic of the struggle in human life:

Here
no
drama
is enacted
now,
life is.
Here
there is
no
luxury.
The struggle
of the storm
and the root
is deep
inside

("The Struggle of the Root")

Life is so great that she discovers something indestructible in life even when it is in distress or is facing death. Nature again provides a symbolic dimension to the expression of this feeling:

Ah, even in the water, the overflowing water
of rainy season,
their tear-drops are glistening
The grief preceding death
(is) in trees and leaves

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like voices of insects
hands
without spears, without bows
sprout like javelins
unseen

("Indestructible")

When she looked at the contemporary society, she found that a segment of that society was drawn to the culture of violence. In a poignantly evocative poem, she condemned this culture of violence and she drew an image from nature to point this out:

Does dawn break
at the sound of a gun?
No, it breaks at the call of that bird
who nibbles away the darkness of night
slowly.

The sharp sound of a gun and the slow call of a bird are juxtaposed in such a manner in this poem that they become mataphors for two different social cultures. At another level, it also speaks of two aspects of human nature, one destructive and the other creative. The destructive nature is described in terms of a man-made weapon and the creative aspect in terms of an innocent inhabitant of nature, a bird.

Nirmalprabha, in her poetry, was thus a romantic modernist and this characteristic distinguished her from her contemporaries. She did not feel that modern poetry needed to turn its back on nature and acquire an urban idiom to express modern sensibility. She did not leave her anchor in nature and only moved up to a metaphoric dimension through nature's images. In her poetry, human life and nature found objective correlatives in each other and found new significance, being defamiliarised.

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi was also one of the finest lyricists of modern Assamese and her lyrics are complementary in themes and thoughts, to her poetry. The difference lay in their expressions. In her poetry, feelings and thoughts were imaged forth through an intellectual sieve; in lyrics they were spontaneous and free-flowing. Set to tunes by some of the best singers and music directors including

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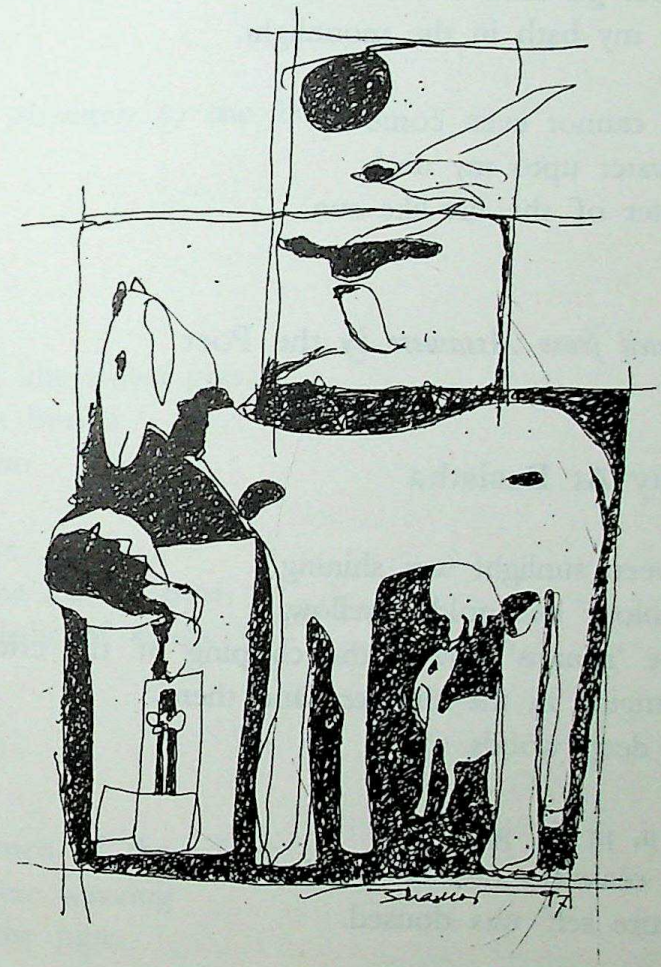
Bhupen Hazarika, her lyrics became very popular and they still are.

In her later life, she embarked on a scholarly pursuit doing research on Hindu deities and their representations in art and culture. Her scholarly book on 'Devi' is a fine product of her painstaking research and has been hailed by discerning critics as an authoritative book on this subject in Assamese.

I pay tribute to this distinguished poet, lyricist and scholar of our time.

❑



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Nirmalprabha Bordoloi

The Bath

When companions called
I did not go then
to take my bath in the moonlight.

Now I cannot even come up
from water upto my neck
the water of the fire-like sun.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Midday At Basistha

The green sunlight was shining
in a colour like golden yellow,
like the 'sonaru' flower; the chirping of the cricket
was hanging in the air, here and there,
in the deep woods.

Jir jir ji, jir jir, jiji
in the ceaseless rain of words
my entire self was doused.

By the tips of my fingers
I flowed down

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to the depth of the woods
With the sole of my feet
I flowed down to the depths
of the roots
In the essence of the woods
taken in by my breath
my soul became merged with
the hollow in the stone,
with the water of the stream
with the chirping of the cricket
with the wild creepers
with the hands of the tall trees.

Remained as witness the silent mid-day.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Bihu I

In the village
In the roots of the *dubari* grass
the sorrows got buried
for a day or two

The village boys
have covered the leaking roof
with the moonlight of songs.

Bihu II

The young women of the village
till yesterday were weaving
the sound of the pipe
in their looms.

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Today on their feet
the dancing fields
have hung the bells of dust.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

What that Girl Plucking Tea Leaves in a Tea Garden of Assam Said in Secret in Spring

With these my two slender hands
I cannot push these tea bushes
to a place which has more shade.

While plucking two leaves and a bud
in sharp sunlight
my hands and face have become darker.

Dhiniki dhindao
Dhiniki dhindao
Dhiniki dhindao dao

Tihiti loila
Tihiti loila
Tihiti loila
Tihiti loila tao

The sound of drums and pipes
has come floating from a nearby village
I am feeling giddy
Bihu is from tomorrow perhaps.
Where are you all
I want to become blue
I want to become golden
I want to burn my body to ashes

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There is so much blood in words
There is so much fire in words.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Heart-Rending

I saw him going
away at the time
when the sun was
declining.
He was going by
the carrying alley
of the paddy fields.

On his head
was a cane hat
On his shoulder
two heavily baskets
making a swishing sound.

Following him
went away
the golden sunshine

Of the month
Of *Aghon**
the patch of the thatch
the mud road
Of clumps of bamboo
and the flock
of singing birds.

---

* Aghon: The eighth month of the Assamese New year. (Nov.-Dec.)

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He was going
and
is gone

Who knows
whether he will
return or
not in this birth.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

My Pronouncement

To destroy the
horror of this
terrible transition
I am searching
for the blazing
flame of the sun.

I am in the Deodhani
of *Marai* worship
I am in Deodhani
of *Kherai* worship.
I am the whirlpool
in the flood
making my untied
hair disorderly,
extending my hand
I dance repeatedly
drinking blood
dashing my head,
slapping my breast
throwing down
violently, accomplishing
I tremble as the storm does.

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Today fire is burning
in my mind
today fire is leaping
in my mind.
Sudden blazing forth of fire
in my eyes
I burn as the fire
of the cremation ground,
I make the past and the future
one and the same
I tear to shreds
the division into castes
trampling upon evil deeds,
putting out the tongue
of destruction.
I like it to its end
I emit a menacing roar
And dance as mad

I am Kamakhya
I am the security
for the bright white time
I am awaiting
for a time not far away
I am the explanation
above the explanation.

I give motion to the
motionless
I gather up all the power
today I destroy the demon
and light a lamp with it.
I drink the blood
of the demon today
Taking the guise
of Chamunda
I gobble up all
the cowardice

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I am the goddess
who eats raw flesh
I chew in the raw
all weariness, fear
and delusion.

I am the night of death
I dance as the night
of death
I dance trampling
over darkness
offended, terrible and
creating horror I dance
I am the roaring sound,
I am the razor
and the tooth
I take the guise of sorrow,
I destroy helplessness

I am the indomitable heroism
I am formless,
I am the short formed
I am the boundless,
endless body
I am eternal,
I am the illusion, knowledge,
I am the beginning.

I am the end.
I take the guise of peace
I am compassion,
I am tranquility to destroy
the evil times
I am the sharp-toothed one.

I am the dancer
of the tandava dance
to destroy time
I am the terrible

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storm of the early summer.
Destroying the worn-out
pressuring culture
I am here
I am here
undivided
able to assume
any guise at will
as an auspicious consciousness
I am here,
I am here,
I am here.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

The Voice of the Drowning

In the prison of
helplessness
hands and feet are
breaking down

The rain of anger
The earthquake of
conspiracy
Shall I get drenched
or shall I shiver
or shall I fight?

In the heart of the
prison
the voice of my
princess
is slowly drowning
"Listen, please
listen My Lord
my husband

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the water has come up
To my mouth."

What to do now
What to do!!

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

The Song of Transformation

I have burnt to ashes
my body
I am being transformed
into an unfailing
power of the will
inside myself

I have pronounced
the mantra of deathlessness
inside myself

I am transformed
from bluish white
to green inside myself
to an infinite blue
I am spaced out with a wonderful power
inside myself
A light of infinite touchiness illumined
from my two eyebrows
inside myself

I have no name now
My name is 'you'
My name is 'he'.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

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These Words

These words
who will sculpt them in wood?
Wood will rot

These words who will sculpt them in stone?
Stone will vanish into nothingness.

Those who will come after us
How will they know,
these words
these words of
utter faithlessness?
Whoever will remember
wings have
grown on words in emptiness
fire is burning on words:
The flying ash
in the thunder-struck bodies
Stricken silence

There is blood in words
The future is in words
O, blue Saraswati
Let the right words be pronounced
like a golden sun
from your dark womb.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

The Signal

I have become
unable to see well
Just see, if truly
the light

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has become
like molten silver?
Like the sharp side
of the sacrificial sword?
I sense something
moving somewhere.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

The Unique Hour

It is at this hour
that the woods press
on my body
It is at this hour
that my body shines like glass
your face is reflected.
It is at this hour
that the weather changes its beauty
like the Sthalapadma*
The sound of the flute becomes green
The storm is not needed
for the silk-cotton tree to flower

Hibiscus mutabilis.....

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Akademi Award-winning Books: 2003

Anek Manuh Anek Thai Aru Nirjanata (Poetry)	Assamese	Bireswar Barua
Krantikal (Novel)	Bengali	Prafulla Roy
Jhull Bada Dea Pattara (Poetry)	Dogri	Ashwini Magotra
The Perishable Empire (Criticism)	English	Meenakshi Mukherjee
Akhepatar (Novel)	Gujarati	Bindu Girdharlal Bhatt
Kitane Pakistan (Novel)	Hindi	Kamleshwar
Kavirajamarga Mattu Kannada Jagattu (Criticism)	Kannada	K.V. Subbanna
Yeli Phol Gaash (Short Stories)	Kashmiri	Somnath Zutshi
Ritambhara (Short Stories)	Maithili	Nirja Renu
Alahayude Penmakkal (Novel)	Malayalam	Sara Joseph
Leiyi Khara Punshi Khara (Short Stories)	Manipuri	Sudhir Naoroibam
Dangora: Eka Nagaricha (Novel)	Marathi	T.V. Sirdeshmukh
Athah (Novel)	Nepali	Bindya Subba
Suryasnata (Criticism)	Oriya	J.M. Mohanty
Bhagat Singh Shaheed: Natak Tikri (Drama)	Punjabi	Charan Das Siddhu
Simran (Poetry)	Rajasthani	Santosh Maya Mohan
Nirjharini (Poetry)	Sanskrit	Bhaskaracharya Tripathi
Kallikkattu Ithihasam (Novel)	Tamil	R. Vairamuthu
Sri Krishna Chandrodayamu (Poetry)	Telugu	Utpala Satyanarayanacharya
Bad-e-Saba ka Intizar (Short Stories)	Urdu	Syed Muhammad Ashraf

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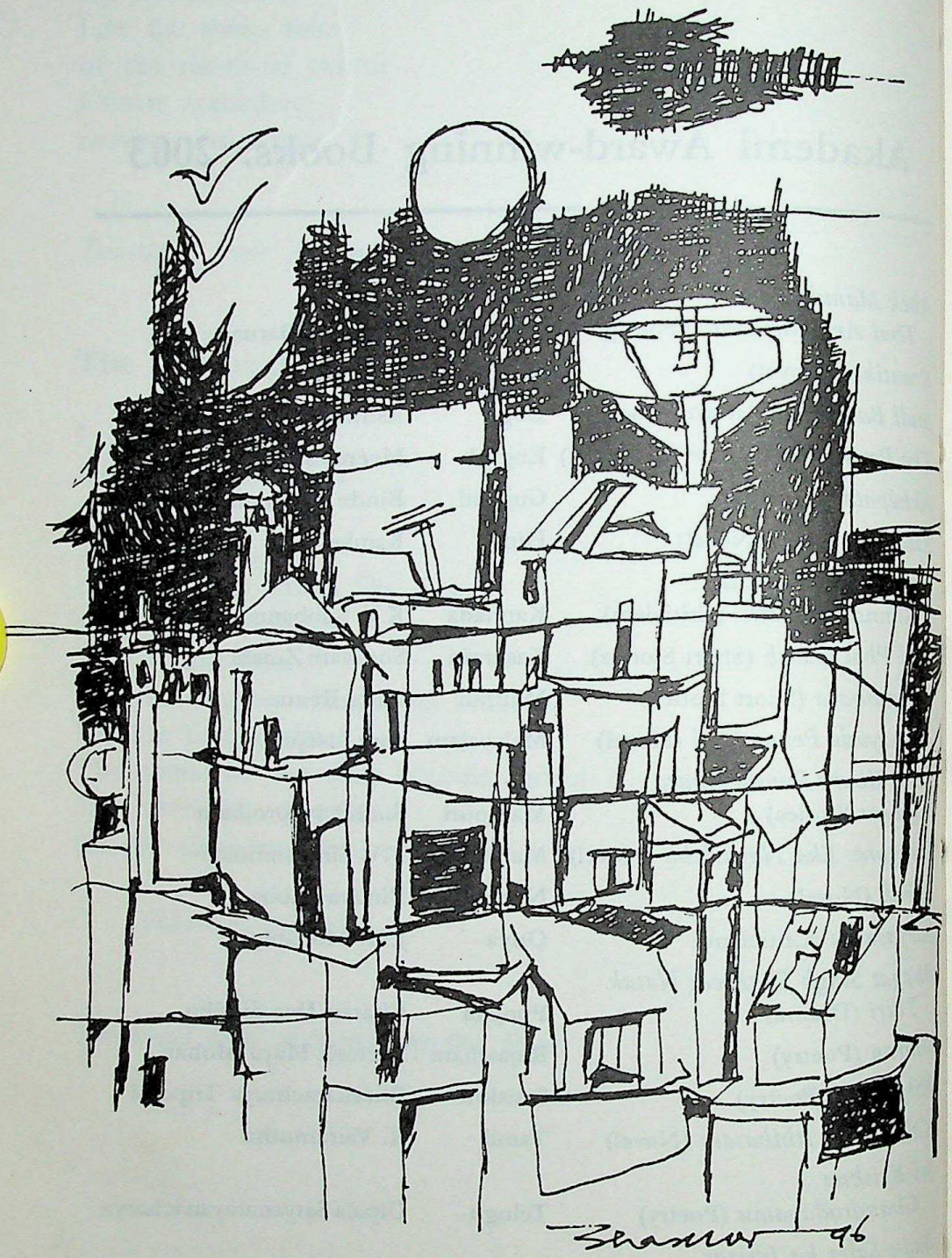

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Authorspeak: Bireswar Barua

The works of the writers of the North East part of our country is generally overlooked by the readers and critics of other States and other languages. My whole-hearted gratitude to the members of the Sahitya Akademi for this benevolent gesture. I humbly consider that I have been given this prestigious honour for my pursuit of an independent path of creative activity in the world of modern Assamese poetry.

I started writing poems since my boyhood and that also, intermittently. I was very fortunate to have learnt early that poetry could make nothing happen. Therefore, I tried to give it up on several occasions. The kind-hearted editors of some literary journals and some benign publishers intervened to dissuade me from this decision. Hence, poetry has remained my companion. In course of time, I have realised that poetry gives solace, peace and character to a poet. I must say that poetry has sustained me in times of crises and in the space of a few years it has become the way of my life. In fact, poetry has proved itself to be a blessing too and a source of strength for me.

I always believe that a poet can survive and have a new lease of life in the works of his contemporary as well as successor poets when they carry, whenever possible, his poetic influence to further and higher glory. This may be done in future by poets even now unborn. In this way, a poet seems to be immortal. Besides, both poet and poetry live only on communication with his readers now and in times to come.

❑

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From the Award-winning Book *Anek Manuh Anek Thai Aru Nirjanata*

Bireswar Barua

Musk-Deer

Driven by wind
her long unbound hair
rested on my face.
She did not remove it.
A sweet perfume.
She asked, 'Wherefrom
this perfume has come?
From your body
from your hair
or from my hair
unbound to dry?'
I said, 'Surely you know
what a musk-deer is.
Perhaps you are searching
for the perfume
of your own body
like a musk-deer
searching for its own.'
She said, 'Perhaps it is so.'
I thought: if it would have been so
and if in search of

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the perfume of your own body
you would have come to my house
and stayed there for ever!

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Since Last Few Days

Since last few days
a thought such as this
has been coming to my mind
that I have found
and then lost something.

Suddenly the phone rings.
I lift the receiver:
This is not from you;
someone wants to talk
to someone else.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Thinking of Oriya Alphabets

Thinking that it was a primer
for learning Oriya
you placed a slender book
in my hand with care.
I eagerly accepted it.
A little later
you came to know that
those were Telugu alphabets.
A sparkling smile slowly formed
on your lips.

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There is no photograph of yours
in this book written by you.
I search for it
among the alphabets
of that book
and realize that
non-existent photographs
could also be felt to touch.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

Of That Day

Some people do not remember phone numbers
Some people do not remember
years months and dates.

But even today I remember
that day
that particular date
—22 September 1990—
That day you promised:
'Why do I need to write?
When I am coming!'

And thereafter?
You have not yet come.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

You Are Perfectly Capable

When people speak ill of you
my heart sinks.

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They do not see you
as I see you.
They do not feel you
as I feel you.

You are away by
hundreds of miles.
There is no contestant against
my love for you either.
Yet my heart sinks
when I hear people speak ill of you;
my hand automatically extends
towards you to help
although I know
that you are perfectly capable
to stand by yourself
without help
from me or from any other.

Translated from Assamese by the Poet

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Authorspeak: Prafulla Roy

I was born in the eastern part of undivided Bengal, in an obscure village of Dhaka district. My ancestors had lived there for generations. We were deeply rooted in that soil.

East Bengal had a magical charm. Bountiful nature adorned the place with loving care. Mighty rivers, like the Padma, the Meghna, the Dhaleshwari and hundreds of other streams made this part of the globe cool, magnificent and fertile. Grass, foliage, creepers, herbs, luxuriant trees—all were shiningly green. Paddy fields ran upto the horizon. Thousands of birds flew in the vast blue sky weaving their colourful patterns. Here life was tranquil and slow.

Two major communities of India – the Hindus and the Muslims – had lived here side by side for centuries.They shared joy and sorrow, grief and happiness of life. They were partners in many a festival. True, there were events of bitterness and petty bickerings, but those were short-lived. There was a more or less cordial relation between the two communities. What we call Bengali culture, was created both by the Hindus and the Muslims.

In this environment my boyhood days and a couple of years of my early youth passed. But after 1940 the placid life of East Bengal suffered a rude shock. The Second World War had broken out a year before. To thwart the Japanese attack swarms of American and British soldiers were rushed to East Bengal. With them arrived immense stores of deadly weapons, jeeps, trucks. Hundreds of military barracks were built. To meet the needs of the army innumerable brothels, liquor shops, etc sprang up. Its immediate effect was shocking. Into the life of Bengal crept in, baseness and filth and the traditional values of life started to erode.

After the end of the War the British Government decided to

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transfer power to India. Forthwith demands were raised to divide the country on the basis of the 'Two Nation Theory'. In this connection throughout the country broke out wide-spread riots. East Bengal was not spared. Thousands of people were killed brutally. Everywhere there was bloodshed, arson, looting rape. Overnight the amity between the two communities was destroyed. After that there was only mutual distrust, hatred and animosity. Ultimately India was divided.

After Partition it was no longer possible to live in East Pakistan. Leaving behind our country, we came to Calcutta, as complete paupers, along with lakhs of other refugees. In Calcutta there was no certainty of a meal, no fixed place to stay. We moved from one place to another. During this period we had to go to North Bihar for shelter. The place was beautiful, almost like East Bengal. But what really attracted me, was the backward people of that region. They were landless, untouchable. Abject poverty was their permanent companion. I found some similarity between their lives and ours. Many years later I came to write a number of novels and stories on the lives of these people.

...We are all aware that for the last few years separatist movements in different parts of the country have shaken India. Those who are involved in these movements have many complaints. They believe they have been neglected for years, that there has been no sign of development in their regions, that no investment has been made, that thousands of educated youths remain unemployed, that their language, ethnic identity, culture, everything is endangered. I have tried to represent all these issues in my novel, *Krantikal.*

❑

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From the Award-winning Book *Krantikal*

Prafulla Roy

Five

Haren had seated Rameshwar Basak, the officer-in-charge (OC) of the Pratappur police station, on a sofa in the hall downstairs, and nervously waited for Subarna. A little way away, three armed constables were standing beside the outside door. They had come with the OC.

When Subarna came downstairs, Rameshwar Basak got up and almost apologetically said, "Please forgive this untimely call, madam." Although monarchy had long since passed, everyone in Pratappur, from the man in the street to the administration and the police, were extremely deferential to the residents of the royal house.

Subarna invited Rameshwar to sit down. As she sat on another sofa opposite him, she said, "Tell me, what can I do for you?" She felt that her trembling that had started as she was coming down the stairs was now much worse.

Rameshwar was about fifty. He was six feet tall and solidly built with thick bones. His skin was copper-coloured, and most of his thick, curly hair was, of course, black, though obviously greying at the temples. He had thick, dark lips, a wide jaw, a flat chin and, under his bushy brows, a pair of keen, intense eyes that flashed and darted here and there. After so many years of chasing after miscreants, there was probably no one in the world he was prepared

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to trust. As far as he was concerned, most people were cheats, frauds, swindlers or murderers and he seemed to believe that all the good people had disappeared from the world.

There was something so fearsome in Rameshwar's appearance that, no matter how hardened the criminal, his hands and feet would still go cold when brought face to face with him. His fearsomeness was greatly enhanced by his curled moustache. Thought of as the god of death to anti-socials in Pratappur City, Rameshwar was both famous and notorious. Once he brought a rapist into the station and gave him such a hiding that the fellow vomitted blood and died. As a result, those concerned with human rights raised their voices in loud protest, and on that occasion he had a lot of trouble keeping his job. Of course, in regard to the man's death, he had not the slightest degree of remorse. In his view, murderers and rapists had no right to a place on the earth. The sooner as many of them as possible were liquidated the better. He could not understand why human rights activists had any sympathy for them. Although he was quite merciless in his attitude to criminals, he was nevertheless an urbane and generous man, but of course, this was not readily appreciated. His character was an extraordinary mix of ruthlessness and amiability.

Rameshwar said, "A violent terrorist from north-eastern India came to our city a week ago. We have been alerted by the police of that region and by the military. After remaining in hiding in various places for a few days, he came out this evening, quite likely to buy food, when one of our patrol vans encountered him. There was a chase, and he came this way. Those on patrol are of the view that he may have got into your palace. Of course, with the fog and the darkness they were not able to see well."

Rajib appeared to Subarna on an imaginary television screen in her mind's eye. Despite his bearded cheeks there was indeed a Mongolian touch in his features that is seen in some people in north-eastern India. Subarna had not the slightest doubt that he was the man Rameshwar was talking about. At first she had thought that he was a killer or a bandit, or some criminal fleeing from custody. Now, evidently, he was a terrorist.

Now and then Subarna's eyes turned automatically to the first floor. It also occurred to her that her glances upwards might arouse

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the suspicions of such an efficient police officer as Rameshwar, so she tried not to look up there any more, keeping her eyes unwaveringly fixed on Rameshwar.

Rameshwar went on. "The man's real name is not known. To protect his identity he has assumed different names from time to time. He's the leader of a big militant outfit. There are allegations that seventy or eighty policemen, soldiers and ordinary civilians have been killed in his name and on his orders, while big company directors and executives have been kidnapped and held captive, with millions of rupees being realised in ransom. He is always armed with an AK-56 rifle and a pistol. He also has such weapons that would blow up fifty houses like this palace of yours."

Hearing this Subarna's heart almost stopped. She just stared at Rameshwar in silence, as though lifeless.

Rameshwar did not stop. "The fellow poses an extreme danger to this city. If he sees a possibility of being captured, who knows when or how he might set off an explosion and reduce a house to rubble with all its occupants? As long as he is in Pratappur City, none of us can have any peace." He paused for a moment, then said, "Well, madam—"

Subarna just looked at him, saying nothing.

Rameshwar then asked, "Has any outsider come into the palace tonight?"

In an imaginary audio-system Subarna could hear Rajib's warning. Slowly she shook her head and said softly, "No."

"You know, you have such a big house. It would be difficult to know if someone had got in after dark at some point or another and was hiding here."

"There is absolutely no possibility of that. At least today—"

"How can you be so sure?"

Subarna explained that entry to the house would have to be through the front door in the ground floor hall. Of course, there was a door at the back, but that was kept locked from inside. To get to the upper floor it would be necessary to climb the stairs from the hall. At one end of the first floor, as on the ground floor, there was a door, and that too was kept bolted all the time. Subarna pointed out that this evening she was downstairs, and had anyone

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entered she certainly would have seen him.

Rameshwar thought for a little while, then said, "All right. We'll be going now. Be very careful. As I said, you have such a big palace that if someone were hiding here, he would not easily be seen. Tomorrow morning take a look at the roof with your servants."

"All right."

"And if you see any suspicious or unfamiliar character, please call the station."

"I will."

"So, then, I'll be off." As he got up from the sofa, Rameshwar said, "I've taken up a lot of your time. *Namaskar.*"

"*Namaskar.*" Subarna too got up. The trembling in her hands and legs still had not abated. Then she remembered that hospitality to anyone who came to the house had been a long-standing rule in this royal family. It was unheard of for a visitor not to be offered tea, sweets or sherbet, but now, for the first time, such hospitality had been neglected. And yet she did not have the nerve to call and tell Maya to bring coffee and biscuits. Rajib was upstairs. If Maya should come down and say something unwittingly to Rameshwar, it could result in the end of the whole family. Still, Subarna's conscience was uncomfortable at not even having offered a mere cup of tea to Rameshwar and his men.

After the police had left, Haren closed the door and came back inside. Subarna was still standing.

Haren was indeed a very good and honest man. Most of the expenditure for shopping and the market had been placed in his hands, and so far no one could say that even a paisa had gone astray. It was not that he never neglected his duty, but only in a very minor way. For better or worse he had been so long with the royal family that he had become one of them. He was utterly averse to any kind of trouble or disturbance, and had quite an irrational dread of the police and the legal system.

In a low, timid voice, Haren said, "You told the inspector that all the doors of the house were shut. That the killer couldn't get in. But couldn't he have climbed up the outside pipe and be hiding on the roof?"

Obviously Haren was talking about the rainwater pipe. Subarna said, "There's nothing we can do at this time of night. Tomorrow

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morning I'll go up on the roof and have a look."

Hurriedly Haren said, "Why should you climb up so many stairs? I'll go."

Subarna was perplexed. She did not want Haren going upstairs under any circumstances. "No, no," she said: "There's no need for you to do that. Look, if the man is hiding on the roof, and if he has a weapon with him—"

Haren now looked quite distressed. He gulped and tried to speak, but he could not.

Subarna said, "It's getting late. Go and cook your dinner. I'm going upstairs."

Although Haren stayed in the house, he had separate eating arrangements which entailed his doing his own cooking.

Subarna waited no longer but wearily climbed the stairs. But as she approached the landing she suddenly stopped. As she passed the huge round pillar that reached up from the ground floor to the roof, there up against it was Rajib. His right hand still bore the remnants of rice and meat curry; his pistol was in his left hand. When their eyes met, he smiled slightly. "Good," he said. "You answered the OC's questions very intelligently."

Subarna guessed that when she had gone downstairs Rajib had got up from the dining table to go and stand behind the pillar. He would have heard everything that she and the police inspector said. Undoubtedly he was observing whether or not Subarna wanted to have him arrested. Had she given his name away to the OC, would he have fired?

Subarna was looking at him, saying nothing.

Rajib said, "Come. Let's go up."

As they climbed the remaining stairs, Rajib said: "I came into this house two hours ago. In that time I've come to realise that you are an extraordinary lady. I am sure that you won't contravene anything I've said. After all, dependent on me is the life or death of everyone in this house. Perhaps you are wondering why I was eavesdropping on your conversation?"

Subarna did not answer.

Rajib said: "Actually, you know, human psychology is a strangely complicated thing. If, seeing the police, you had become desperate and said too much, then—"

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Not taking her eyes away from his, Subarna said, "You don't really trust anyone. Isn't that so?"

"Exactly. I probably told you before, I don't have any such intensely human qualities as trust, respect, love, sympathy. I'll not take the slightest chance of falling into trouble."

Subarna said, "Can I ask you something? Of course, you warned me before that you would ask the questions and I would give the answers. However—"

Rajib interrupted her. "What do you want to ask?"

With considerable nerve Subarna said: "You have a weapon in your hand. It is not improbable that others may have weapons too, and know how to use them. How long can you go on in this way?"

Rajib looked a little unsettled. He said sharply: "As long as it is possible."

Subarna remained silent.

When Rajib had gone down to the landing, he had not finished his dinner, so when they got back upstairs, he sat down again to eat.

Subarna, of course, did not sit down, but remained standing beside the table.

Rajib took a piece of meat and said: "You learned something of me from the police inspector."

Subarna answered in a shaky voice: "Yes. He was saying that you—you are—" She suddenly stopped, and did not finish what she was going to say.

Chewing on the meat, Rajib said in a very relaxed manner: "A dreaded terrorist. There's another bit of information he forgot to tell you, or that he doesn't know."

"What information?" Subarna asked shortly.

"That there's a price of five million rupees on my head. Five million. Dead or alive. As long as I'm handed over in any condition, the government will pay the reward."

Subarna lowered her eyes, but said nothing.

Leaning a long way forward, Rajib said: "The amount is huge, certainly big enough to excite human greed. Even the world's greatest coward would be desperate for it. But it would be a terrible kind

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of risk." He kept his eyes fixed on Subarna as he carefully articulated this.

Subarna demonstrated not the slightest degree of interest in the immense reward. Indifferently she said: "I have to give my father-in-law his medicine, and it's time for Grandfather's dinner. Then I have to see to Debi's lessons for tomorrow. Can I go now?"

Rajib did not take his eyes off Subarna. Slowly he said, "Yes, you can go."

Translated from Bengali by John Hood

❑

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From the Award-winning Book *Jhull Bada Dea Pattara*

Ashwini Magotra

Lohri

Here comes Lohri, festival of youngsters
moving with arms around each other
dancing Bhangra, going around asking Lohri-gifts
Oh, here's a group dressed as *Haran*
There's another, with decorated *Chhajja*
cavorting to steps of *Dandaras*
This side appears a band of young girls
partners sharing the play and joy
Their lips bursting into melodious songs
like *Kanjaks* singing *Bhajnas* at Vaishno Devi Cave
Come night, everyone lit ceremonial fire
Clever singers strike out spontaneous notes
The cold night gets a little warmer
Drumbeats change one after another
Time seems to freeze as extended moments
nurturing pangs in love-stricken hearts
The nip in the air adds warmth to the blaze
Sway oh Banyan leaf, you've been planted by dear ones.

Translated from Dogri by Lalit Gupta

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Spring

Winter abates and weather looks-up
cold-shivering lips start quivering with notes
Day-to-day speech acquire poetic overtones
Higher reaches cold, plains lit-up with sunshine
Limbs start feeling the languorous stretch
Hearts gladden up to the tidings of spring
New songs emerge on cold lips
like cinders of emotions on lips
Blood starts warming up in veins
Underground water-vein waiting to gush forth
Oh, Banyan, your branches too are full of vital juices
The cold-bitten yellow leaves have fallen down
Fresh leaves are so green and supple
Light–grey shoots are beauties to look at
halting eastern-wind's flow like a child learning to walk
A newly-wed hesitantly peeping out from behind the veil
Everyone gets a surge of energy
Mountain streams seem like silver melting down
The cold-places look young and novel
Sway O Banyan leaf, you've been planted by dear ones.

Translated from Dogri by Lalit Gupta

Daughters

In your company I recollect memories
Memories, live-coals in the bosom
Chaos igniting them into a blaze
devours flesh and soul, and still remains unaltered
When blazes of memories flare up-wards
appearing like fast-moving arms of dark shadows
Some sandcastles appear on the mind's screen then
decorated in childhood with great love

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A mixture of child's adamancy and affection
fun-frolic, playing games and winning endlessly
Always making others to tow your line
If not, then fret and fume, cry all-day
You have spoiled her, Mother says
Don't you scold her, says Father
Oh dear, daughters are only for safekeeping
Bring them up and get them married
like sparrows they are to fly away one day
to visit Mother's house only during short annual trips
They are someone else's treasure, with us for a brief period
Sway O Banyan tree, you've been planted dear ones.

Translated from Dogri by Lalit Gupta

Daughters-2

Children assemble by the riverside
to make structures in sand
only to be broken by boys' gang
Soma gets angry and again is her normal self
The younger brother, the devil, doesn't listen
sweet talker, he can cheat in a jiffy
Girls make while boys break
There is no one to stop them
If his misdeeds are told to Father
Mother comes to the junior's support
Boys break, destroy, girls get the blame
One can stitch a cloth but how to mend the sky
Girls are gentle, still irritate parents
Boys always dear, even if unruly
Girls destined to become a guest in her own home
Oh God, even an enemy may not face such a fate
A tree planted by one, its fruits to be tasted by strangers,
For daughters, customs and traditions are the destiny

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Daughters are some one's treasure—fated to be such
Sway O Banyan tree, you've been planted by dear ones.

Translated from Dogri by Lalit Gupta

Woman

Woman is creator not a destroyer
For creation she even burns her blood
Man, a creature of desires since time immemorial
sturdy to look at but suffers from mental blocks
All his steps are motivated to satiate hunger
Can't tolerate someone surpassing him
All wars that are fought till today
with swords, bullets and bombs
have been compelled by compulsions
making him to forget innate goodness
He has shown weakness, umpteen times
that too for a piece of land
A winner never criticizes himself
he always owns his victory, basks in it
What is considered bravery
is in fact the biggest act of immorality
Who loots, plunders, battles and makes wars?
Whose bullet kills whom?
Whose blood is colouring this earth?
Sway O Banyan leaf, you've been planted by dear ones!

Translated from Dogri by Lalit Gupta

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Authorspeak: Meenakshi Mukherjee

As a person addicted to reading I have always enjoyed writing about other people's work, perhaps an attempt to prolong the excitement of the reading experience....

I studied English literature at a time when the English departments in India aspired to be replicas of English departments in Britain....

At home I used to read a lot of literature in Bangla from childhood and some Hindi, but never imagined this could have any relevance to my study of English literature. Born in a Bangla-speaking family in a region where Hindi was the language outside home, a bilingual ethos was the normal condition of my life where English was hardly ever used, but the classroom was a sacred, sanitised space, never to be contaminated by the lively, but chaotic world outside....

My first foray into an uncharted literary territory was exploring novels in English, but not by British writers—by Indians. This was in the nineteen sixties. Such was the extent of my insularity that I had never heard of these novelists; I happened to come across R.K. Narayan's novels, then a few other writers like B. Rajan, Kamala Markandeya, quite by chance, not in the university library, which would not dream of stocking them, but in a private library in Patna —Sinha Library, which was originally the personal collection of Satchidananda Sinha. I felt interested enough to seek out more such writers who were writing about a world I knew in the first hand, even though their language was English and was intrigued by the incongruity of the enterprise. Eventually I wanted to write a Ph.D. thesis on them so that I could study this phenomenon in depth. It was not an academically acceptable idea.

....Soon I came to realise that Indian languages do not exist

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in isolation; linguistic boundaries always turn out to be porous. And specially English, which has no specific geographic constituency in our country, needs to be studied in the context of the other languages that surround it just as other languages need to be looked at in relation to the impact of the study of English which has been compulsory for us for more than a hundred and fifty years....

My special interest is in the novel and I became increasingly aware that this entire field in India is an intricately textured web. My attempt since then has been to unravel the tangles of this web by taking into consideration the indirect economic and social pressures that impinge on literary production and explore how literary culture is part of the larger history of a society. Since no one can read all the major languages of India, translation has to play a major role in literary research of this kind. The book of mine that has been singled out by Sahitya Akademi is an attempt to trace the complex and evolving relationship between English and India from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the millennium, by looking at the layered context of other languages. I had set myself similar goals in two other books earlier, but even today it remains an incomplete project. What I have been trying to map is an elusive literary terrain—which is reconfiguring so fast that no cartographer's report can be final.

But I feel very hopeful because English departments in the country have begun to open their windows and many bright young scholars are today pushing the frontiers of literary study in innovative ways. Indian Writing in English has gained global visibility in the last two decades and we no longer need to worry about the academic acceptance of this much-discussed postcolonial phenomenon. But it needs to be asserted again and again that literary production in English is only a part of a larger cultural process in India that has to be looked at in its totality.

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From the Award-winning Book *The Perishable Empire*

Meenakshi Mukherjee

10
Divided by a Common Language

Translations have always been a vital part of Indian literary culture even when the word 'translation' or any of its Indian language equivalents — *anuvad, tarjuma, bhashantar* or *vivartanam* — were not evoked to describe the activity. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been retold in almost every Indian language, and stories not only from Sanskrit but Arabic and Persian also have freely travelled from region to region through adaptations and modifications. Folk-tales circulate in India, as they do all over the world, paying scant heed to language boundaries. In the early era of the novel in India, many novels from England were indigenized in our languages sometimes with necessary modifications to give them a local habitation and a name. Translations, adaptations, abridgements and recreations were overlapping activities and it was not considered important to mark their separate jurisdictions. I grew up reading abridged children's classics in Bangla—ranging from *The Iliad, Sindbad the Sailor, Les Miserables, The Three Musketeers* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, many of which, I am ashamed to admit, I never went on to read either in the original or in fuller versions in later life and did not feel particularly deprived.

What has changed in the situation is that now we are focusing

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on translation as a field of study rather than as part of the natural ambience we live in. It is certainly a more self-conscious act today, and is being discussed more than ever before; in 1998, for example, there have been no less than half a dozen seminars, workshops and conferences on translation in India, some of which I have attended, others I have heard about. In the last quarter of the twentieth century an academic discipline has evolved — first in the European and North American universities, and now gradually making its way to our shores — which concerns itself with the semantic, cultural and political issues involved in the act of linguistic transfer and its history through the centuries. As in other disciplines, in the humanities and social sciences in India, only much more so in Translation Studies, scholars cannot get very far by being derivative of its western model. The complex linguistic dynamics within the country, and the ambivalent position of English in present-day Indian culture (simultaneously a local as well as global medium) create, along with porous language boundaries[1] and many other factors peculiar to India, a unique configuration that cannot be analysed by existing translation theories originating in Europe. But first, we need to gather a great deal of empirical data on the situation in India before theoretical tools of our own can emerge.

Even without statistical surveys, certain diachronic changes in translation practice in India seem fairly apparent. The translation of novels from one Indian language to another (and here I am going to look at novels only), which was a major conduit of cultural transmission within the country for nearly a century, seems to have declined in recent decades to make way for a new activity which is fast growing in visibility—the translation of Indian language fiction into English. In the early part of the twentieth century Marathi readers knew Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay through direct translations from Bangla and, Harinarain Apte, a major early novelist in Marathi, would have been known in the neighbouring regions in Kannada or Telugu versions. Lalithambika Antherjanam (1909-88) acknowledges the early influence not only of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and Outside* on her writing, but of a much less known Bangla writer Sitadevi Chattopadhyay on her Malayalam writing.[2] I have met several North Indian readers who casually assumed that Saratchandra Chatterjee was originally a Hindi writer—such was the widespread availability

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of his novels in translation and his grass-roots popularity in regions outside Bengal. In my classroom in Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi) where a cross-section of selected students come from all over the country, even in the late 1980s I used to come across an occasional student from Kerala who knew Premchand's *Godan* or Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Arogya Niketan* through Malayalam translation, but such readers are far fewer today than they were a generation ago.

To me this decline is a matter of regret for several reasons. Transferring a text — say from Hindi to Bangla or from Marathi to Kannada — is a far more natural and satisfactory activity both for the translator and the reader than when the same novels are rendered into English, where negotiating semantic and cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning tends to be a relatively uphill task. I say this in full awareness of Edward Sapir's statement that, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality" (p.69). It is true that even neighbouring languages do not inhabit identical universes but intersecting penumbras of meaning between two languages in the subcontinent are likely to generate a richer resonance of recognition and discovery than the against-the-grain 'elevation' into the master language of the world with certain inevitable attenuation of specificity. The target audiences are also very different in each case. The potential readers for an English translation of, say, a novel by Shivaram Karanth or Manik Bandhopadhyay would be an indeterminate and undifferentiated mass, situated either in the same region or in another part of India. Among them some may have rural hinterlands, in their background, not entirely unlike what these writers draw their material from, or they may be cosmopolitan urban Indians in the metropolis with no exposure, either direct or literary, to subaltern Indian life. Or the reader may be in another country altogether, with no previous knowledge of the ethos being represented. As a result, the anxiety of communication gets reflected in an explicatory or dilutionary tendency. But the translation, say from Gujarati into Hindi or from Oriya into Bangla used to be undertaken for a very specific and well-defined audience, and consequently the nervous uncertainty about decoding culture would be less evident. Moreover, when a local language text gets translated into a global and economically stronger

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language like English, there is an implicit and inevitable hierarchy involved in the process. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have pointed out: 'Translation takes place where two, invariably unequal worlds collide, and...there are always relationships of power involved when one world is represented for another in translation' (p.xxii). Since most Indian languages (hopefully) occupied roughly parallel spaces in our culture, specially in relation to the master space occupied by English, the politics of power might have played a lesser part in these mutual translations. It would however be simplistic to assume that all the Indian languages, either in their own self-perceptions or in perceptions of each other, had equal partnership in a common literary endeavour. The discrepancy in the numbers of translations from and into a particular language is one of the indices of this inequality. For example, many Bangla novels were translated into Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Marathi, but the reverse did not happen. But by and large that does not substantially alter my statement that translation among Indian languages used to be a major literary activity in the past.

I speak in the .past tense not because such translations have ceased altogether, but because they are no longer perceived as important in the respective languages while every English publisher in Mumbai, Chennai or Delhi is hastening to add titles in translation to their existing catalogues to keep up with the times. Only in the realm of drama the state of mutual translation continues to be relatively healthy and vigorous. Perhaps the general dearth of good plays in India makes the theatre world conscious of the need to share whatever is available. Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchvar, G.P. Deshpande, Satish Alekar and now Mahesh Dattani travel from language to language with ease, to be performed successfully in different parts of the country, although not all these translated scripts achieve the permanence of printed books.

But in the genre of the novel mutual translation is now by and large a neglected literary activity, while a growing number of people — many of them connected with English teaching at the college and university level — are trying their hand at translating Indian-language texts into English. Some amount of translation activity does continue in languages like Hindi and Malayalam, tra

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ditionally more hospitable to texts from other parts of India than some other languages, and over the decades these languages have been enriched by this ready receptivity. In contrast Bangla is a poorer language to the extent that, although eager to translate from European literature, it has been stubbornly resistant to contemporary writing from the rest of the country. The alleged literary superiority of Bangla is a matter of history now, but the arrogance perpetrated by that myth continues to the present day. The few available Bangla translations from Tamil, Urdu or Marathi are all officially undertaken projects, sponsored by the Sahitya Akademi or the National Book Trust, hence reflect neither popular interest nor literary predilections.

In 1996 when a three-cornered project called Kaveri-Ganga was launched as one of the many activities of the *Katha* imprint to produce direct translations among three languages – Bangla, Tamil and Kannada – the real difficulty turned out to be identifying bilingual translators.[3] Evidently proficiency in Indian languages is no longer the marker of sophistication and culture as it had once been in India. The few capable translators located after an intense search turned out to be all elderly and retired people. Among the metropolitan youth today, even among those interested in literature, literary knowledge of even one Indian language—not to speak of two— is considered redundant if one has proficiency in English. Global monolingualism is the aspiration of the younger generation today.

In July 1997 the Kaveri-Ganga project succeeded in producing three slim but excellent volumes in three languages—Tamil, Kannada and Bangla. But amid the din of publicity of books with bigger marketing budgets, not much has been heard of this modest venture, even in the respective languages. Books are noticed and read not necessarily because of their intrinsic quality; their success often depends on strategies of publicity and distribution. Hence books translated from one Indian language to another may never compete with translations into English which have, to begin with, an all-India urban market, and potentially a bigger one in other English-speaking countries.

However, once we accept the inevitability of this change as the consequence of globalization, instead of merely regretting the decline in mutual translations we should also be looking into the positive potential of this publication boom of English translations

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from Indian-language fiction. Hypothetically, Bhalchandra Nemade's Marathi novel *Kosla* (in English translation *The Cocoon*) or O.V. Vijayan's Malayalam novel *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (in translation *The Legends of Khasak*), both much acclaimed in the 1960s in their respective languages, now become available not only to Indian readers who do not read Marathi or Malayalam, but also to readers in Australia, Canada, Britain or USA should they want to read these books. How widely this is actually happening is a question worth considering.

It is not that English translations of Indian fiction are an entirely new phenomenon, but, barring a few exceptions, until the sixties of the twentieth century it had been like a sporadic cottage industry —the author himself or his friends attempting amateurish translations of isolated texts and bringing out limited editions privately—which were hardly ever commercially distributed. In the sixties came a few organized ventures, by Jaico Paperbacks, Hind Pocket Books, and Asia Publishing House. There was also an excellent series sponsored by UNESCO which made well-known novels like *Pather Panchali, Umrao Jan Ada, Chemmeen, Garambicha Bapu* and *Putul Nacher Itikatha* available in English. But that was a trickle compared to the spate we are witnessing now. Except for the UNESCO project, which in any case did not originate here, Indian publishers in the sixties did not display much professionalism in their enterprise. Very rarely would there be an attempt to introduce the author or the text or to provide a suitable frame to help the uninitiated reader. Sangam Paperbacks, an imprint of Orient Longman, in the seventies were the only exception, and might have, without too much fanfare, paved the way to the more systematic activity we have been witnessing in the next two decades. There is now a careful selection — or at least a semblance of it — of the texts to be translated, an attempt to provide a suitable context for each text through an Introduction, Translator's Preface and Notes, and a consciousness about the need for quality control over the texture of the language. The latter however is an activity fraught with controversy. It seems the policy of certain translators to achieve smoothness and readerly ease at any cost while others take a deliberate position that the language of translation must contain syntactical as well as lexical reminders that the source text comes from another culture. One recalls that the editors of the influential two volumes of *Women Writing in India* were the earliest to formulate the second position:

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> We have tried therefore (not always successfully) to strain against the reductive and often stereotypical homogenization involved in the process. We preferred translations that did not domesticate the work either into a pan-Indian or into a 'universalist' mode, but demanded of the reader too a translation of herself into another socio-cultural ethos (p.xxii).

As a result of such articulation of positions there is now a consciousness about the issues involved and a healthy debate has ensued about criteria of judgement in evaluating translation.

The imprints that have high visibility today in this area of fiction translation into English are Macmillan India who have published twenty-four novels in three years, Katha, Seagull Books, Penguin India, Disha Books, Affiliated East-West, Kali for Women, Stree—and institutions like Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust. Even a research centre like The Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla has of late been publishing translations from Hindi and Urdu. The total number of Indian fiction texts available in English translation is not negligible today, even though these would constitute the tip of the iceberg when compared to what remains untranslated.

It is true that some of the most enduring novels in each of our languages are virtually untranslatable because of their local and specific frames of reference and the play upon variations of language and dialect, which invariably suffer attenuation when translated in English but may not suffer as drastically when translated into another Indian language. One example is Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1947) a novel that would figure in my personal list of the ten best novels of the world in the twentieth century, which has never been translated into English, perhaps because the caste/class/tribe interaction in the novel is represented partially through variegated registers of speech. Incidentally, an excellent Hindi translation of this book has been available for some years. Similarly, a Bangla novel called *Aranyer Adhikar* (1979), which for me is the best work of Mahasweta Devi, is still not available in English although some of her short stories are. But this novel was translated into Hindi, Telugu and a few other Indian languages a couple of decades ago. There may be more such examples in languages to which I do not have access.

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Indeed, the totality of our fiction texts available in English translation may be an infinitesimal fraction of what actually exists in any of the major languages of India, nor do the texts always re-present the best—but quantitatively this entire body can compare favourably with, say, Indian novels originally written in English, which used to be a trickle earlier, but in the last two decades have become a steady stream daily gaining in volume.

Thus we have two numerically comparable sets—Indian novels *written* in English and Indian novels *translated* into English, and the asymmetry in their reception is evident to all. Novelists who choose to write in English, at least the best of them, attract international media attention, their books sell in other countries as well as in India, and get translated into several European languages. Even within India people in the urban areas are far more knowledgeable about the latest novel by an Indian English writer and the amount of advance or royalty he or she is getting than in keeping up with what is available from the Indian languages. There is a vague feeling that such translations are a good idea, and some of them, specially those connected with English Studies, even aspire to do some translations from their mother tongue some day—but if pressed they would admit that they have never read a single novel from another Indian language in English translation. Bookshops display new novels in English prominently, but in order to find the translated ones, one would have to go to the back of the shop and bend in uncomfortable positions to locate a few dusty copies. While writers like Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohinton Mistry and Arundhati Roy are reviewed and interviewed widely, invited for readings from Seattle to Sydney, not many outside the borders of India, and very few outside the specific language communities within India, have heard of Ismat Chughtai, Gopinath Mohanty, Shivaram Karanth or Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay who write in Urdu, Oriya, Kannada and Bangla, respectively. But language need not be a barrier to accessibility because English translations of at least one novel by each of these writers and in some cases more, are available quite easily for anyone who would care to look for them.

But who should care to look for them and why? Books do not exist in the abstract realm of aesthetic value alone. People read books either because the desire to read a specific text is created

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through advertisement and discussion in the media, which are then seductively marketed like any other consumer product. Alternatively, they are read if put on reading lists in academic courses. One of the reasons of their relative invisibility may well be that translated novels are brought out mostly by Indian publishing houses that neither have large advertising budgets nor a promotional network to project their books outside the country. The question to ask then is why do multinational publishing concerns — generally based in London or New York — never touch translations from India, when they do, more and more, publish and promote Indian novels written originally in English? The standard reason put forward to explain away this omission — poor quality of translations[4] — does not seem adequate because translation is no longer an entirely amateur activity in India and the entire question of who decides the criteria for good translation throws up issues about the hierarchy of cultures. The natural superiority of an original novel over a translated novel cannot also be sustained as a reason at a time when all the old adages propagating the secondary status of a translated text have been challenged and discarded. 'Translation is the reverse side of the carpet', 'the translator is a traitor', 'poetry is what is lost in translation': such cliches of an earlier era are now anathema to translators and translation theorists the world over who see translation as a creative and interpretative act. In this altered state of consciousness when the earlier metaphors of inequality between the original and the translation (master/slave or male/female, the most offensive being the one that sees faithfulness and beauty being mutually exclusive) are being turned upside down, one has to look for other reasons why multinational publishers do not consider taking up translations from India. Specially when the same publishers have no difficulty in publishing and selling translations from Colombia, Argentina, Poland or Czechoslovakia and securing world-wide media coverage for them.

The category of writers called 'The Third World Cosmopolitans,' who are globally visible, who are taught in postcolonial classrooms the world over, and who are hailed in the review pages of western journals as interpreters and authentic voices of the non-western world, hardly ever include a writer from India who does not write in English. This group includes Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa,

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Isabel Allende, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and a few others. It is interesting that even though this list contains Latin American writers who have been translated into English, the precondition for belonging to this club for an Indian is that s/he must write originally in English. Implicit here is an erasure of the diversity of India.

There is also a pedagogical factor in the dissemination of books: When prescribed in university curricula, novels certainly get a wider currency. Unfortunately, in Indian universities, English departments by and large continue to be orthodox in their course of studies, and even though some might prescribe Homer or Dostoevsky or Ibsen in English translation, inclusion of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916) or O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889) is strongly resisted on the grounds that a student of English only be given books that are composed in that language. The argument that a translated novel enriches the receiving language is hardly ever considered. The situation is changing a little of late, but only in the more progressive universities.

Less explicable is the absence of translated Indian novels in postcolonial literature courses that are proliferating in the numerous English departments of universities in the USA, Canada, Australia and several places in Europe, partly in response to the increasing multicultural components in their own population, and partly due to an ideological climate that emphasizes the need to open out an Euro-centric academia to the plurality of the world. These universities are far more innovative and the teachers there have greater autonomy in the selection of texts than what the system allows in India. Yet, when these courses include Indian texts, they invariably bring in R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul (who for some reason often qualifies there as an Indian), Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai—and sometimes younger writers in English like Rohinton Mistry or, more recently, Arundhati Roy. The only two writers sometimes to be included who do not write originally in English are U.R. Anantha Murthy (only his novel *Samskara* which was translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan), and Mahasweta Devi (the short stories translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak).[5] In both cases the translators' credentials in the American academy and their appropriate mediation of the texts (through commentary, interpretation and prefatory material) may be as much

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the reason for such inclusion as, the intrinsic quality of the texts themselves, because works by these authors translated by others have not received similar academic attention. For example, Anantha Murthy's second novel *Bharatipura*, also available in English translation, to me a far more complex and nuanced work foregrounding an individual situated at the cusp of history and very different from the fable-like quality that marks *Samskara*, has hardly been critically noticed outside Karnataka. The attraction of *Samskara* to those outside its cultural milieu may well be the timeless, allegorical quality of the protagonist's existentialist dilemma. *Bharatipura* on the other hand, presents an intricate web of predicaments, tangled in caste and class tensions and kinship and ritual patterns peculiar to that region of Karnataka, and a specific moment in time. Although the shifting configuration of a community's public and private value systems are its major focus, the novel cannot be simplified into a predictable bi-polar tradition/modernity dialectic. The stubbornly local and regional novels in the Indian languages, at least the best of them, generally resist such reductive readings, often refusing easy accessibility to those outside the culture. This may be one of the many reasons why some of the best novels from India do not find a ready readership abroad. The novels written originally in English, on the other hand, do not take for granted too many cultural assumptions, because they are addressing a heterogeneous audience. This question of addressivity may well be at the root of the asymmetry mentioned earlier.

Indian writers in English have for a long time been engaged — though not always self-consciously — in the construction of a clearly defined and recognizable India. Raja Rao's definition had a brahmanic frame; R.K. Narayan distilled its essence through a benign small town, middle-class and upper-caste in its composition; some others constructed their India in opposition to what the West was supposed to connote. What appeared homogeneous from a certain discursive perspective easily dissolved into pluralities in Indian-language fiction because the perspective is from within. Because the original target audience of the English novel about India is different from that of the specific audience of the Hindi or Bangla novel, certain shifts in representation become inevitable. Also the socio-economic as well as spatial location of the two sets of writers create differences in their angles of vision. For the urban or diasporic English

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writer, issues of caste, subcaste and tribe, tensions and pressures of a convoluted local variety do not assume the same intricacy and urgency as those directly involved in them. A comment recently made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be used here to strengthen the point.

> The relationship between the writer of 'vernacular' and Indo-Anglian literature is a site of class-cultural struggle. Indeed the sphere of Indo-Anglian writing and vernacular writing are usually not in serious contact. By class-cultural struggle is meant a struggle in the production of cultural or cultural-political identity. (pp.126-7)

The novelist in the Indian language seems more involved with the local and the particular, compared to the national project in English which has a greater anxiety to appear 'Indian' because the target readership is diffuse and may include those who have no first-hand experience of India. This anxiety sometimes manifests itself in a pull towards homogenization, an inability to perceive those realities which are situated outside the cognitive limits imposed by English and which cannot be appropriated into the East-West or colonial-indigenous paradigms.

It is not only the earlier writers who felt the need to construct a unitary and recognizable India. In a book published as recently as 1997 (*Love and Longing in Bombay* by Vikram Chandra) the author calls the five sections—'Dharma', 'Bhakti', 'Kama', 'Shakti' and 'Shanti'—disembodied signifiers for India that promise to live up to the unambiguous alterity of the title. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), the second book by a California-based Indian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, contains the kind of exotic colours to evoke the country that might have embarrassed an Indian language writer: 'my birthland, land of aquamarine feathers, sunset skies as brilliant as blood'. In this tale of a mysterious eastern woman, the distinctly 'Indian' flavour of the title is intensified by naming the sections 'Turmeric', 'Red Chilli', 'Peppercorn', 'Lotus Root' and ending, for good measure, with a climactic chapter called 'Maya', in case the seasonings have not been sufficiently cooked. For those in India, spices are taken-for-granted ingredients of daily cooking and do not carry any cultural

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connotation. They assume a symbolic value only when dislodged from their normal context. Since novels in English are read in many regions across the globe, there is perhaps an urgency to announce the specificity of India fairly early in the novel, or in the chapter headings, if not in the title itself.

Certain words, objects and concepts are associated with India in the popular imagination outside the country, which the writer in English may be tempted to deploy as short-cuts to create an ambience. The imperative to essentialize India through evocation of local colour or standard signifiers is naturally less perceptible in the Indian-language novel where intricate tensions of community, religion, caste, language, region and class assume a greater immediacy and the question of Indianness is seldom addressed. In this context Jorge Louis Borges' comments on how 'what is truly native can and often does dispense with local colour' is worth remembering. U.R. Anantha Murthy quotes this passage from Borges as an epigraph to one of his essays:

> Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book par excellence, in the Koran, there are no camels; I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were specially Arabian; for him they were part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them...he knew he could be an Arab without camels. (p. 105)

Does this mean that if the Koran had been written originally in English, the presence of camels might have been unavoidable? One does not know. While all generalizations in literature are hazardous, and one always looks forward to exceptions that would challenge truism, Borges' camels might for the sake of convenience serve as a suitable metaphor for the differential representation I have been trying to describe. In India the constituency of readership is determined by the language of original composition. Even when a Hindi or Bangla text is translated into English, the subtext of assumptions and references do not always get easily transferred to another culture.

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Thus the fates of the Indian novel in English and the Indian novel in English translation might continue to be dissimilar in the global market. But there is a potentially large domestic market to justify the present surge of translations into English.

Notes

1. For example the poet Vidyapati is claimed both by Bangla and Maithili, and Meerabai's language has elements of both Rajasthani and Gujarati.
2. 'A Woman Writer's Reply', translated by Gita Krishnankutty in *Cast Me Out If You Will: Stories and, Memoirs,* p.53. The translator in her Introduction to the volume informs us that the Malayalam translation that Lalithambika read was done by B. Kalyani Amma in 1921.
3. My data about this is derived from conversations with Enakshi Chatterjee, the Bangla co-ordinator for the project.
4. Dilip Chitre expressed this view categorically when an earlier version of this paper was presented at the Asiatic Society, Mumbai, in November 1997.
5. The data for these comments on the courses of study is based on my experience of interacting with students and researchers during my teaching assignments and lecture tours in the USA in 1990,1997 and 1998, in Canada in 1992 and 1997, and in Australia in 1993 and 1996.

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Authorspeak: Bindu Bhatt

I can see that there are innumerable possibilities and various opportunities open before the women of my time. But, are they able to benefit from them? The woman who seems free in the atmosphere of an unrestricted market-place—has she really got freedom? I live in the city but I am closely attached to the villages of my Saurashtra. Here in Gandhinagar, as a teacher, through my students I am connected to the villages also. The borders of villages and cities seem to be vanishing. The village-woman of my times has to become acquainted with two worlds simultaneously but the codes of conduct to be adhered to in these two worlds have not reached her yet. The women of lower-classes and the middle-classes are becoming more aware now. They are not ready to blindly accept convention in the name of tradition, but her role as a rebel is not clear to her. The areas of work of a woman have definitely increased but they are not changing. There are many such questions with which I want to struggle/fight at a creative level.

As a vigilant intellectual and a woman, I find myself connected to the consciousness of the changing woman in the contemporary context. I have to uncover each and every face that is blocking the capacity and ability of women. Instead of binding myself within the boundaries of any 'controversy', I feel bound within a 'complete life'. I am against every form that is against humanity. Possibly, in future, my story-writing may go in any such direction where this churning of mine could take some creative shape.

Akhepatar is perhaps the first novel in Gujarati in which, against the background of Indian Partition, the social and financial struggle of a woman from a middle class orthodox Brahmin family from the Saurashtra region of Gujarat has been described.

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From the Award-winning Book *Akhepatar*

Bindu Bhatt

Both the women were face to face but speechless. Between them was a table. They were about to have a handshake. Inside their hearts, somebody had tightened strings of an old sitar ready to sing out by playing fingers. Both were trying to understand it. How to separate voices of different birds from their song coming from a big tree early in the morning? It was certain that it was about to dawn. The same was the case here also. Separated for many years Kanchan and Jaya were face to face. Rays of kinship were illuminating the deep darkness of the interval. Kanchan readied herself for a handshake. Jaya could not wait for a moment. Pushing the chair aside, she embraced Kanchan.

'Bhabhi!' the now almost-forgotten salutation of Jaya deeply moved Kanchan. For the first time in the last fifteen years, she felt linked up with family and society. Kanchan was astounded, and embarrassed. She thought she was dreaming. Her shoulders were wet with the tears of Jaya. Kanchan continued to console Jaya assuring her that this was neither a dream nor imagination but reality. As real as the branches of a tree. Years after, Kanchan felt connected with the roots and to the family-tree. She was overjoyed. Her heart heard manifold echoes of joy. Her depressed self was coming into her own after a pretty long period. As if the mere touch was not enough, she took Jaya's face into her palm and brought it before her eyes. Tearful eyes made her face foggy. Wiping her own tears

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Kanchan continued to caress her and Jaya felt the affection of mother, father, brother, bhabhi and bossom friend in that touch.

This scene of meeting and hugging could have lasted long but the school-bell rang indicating a small recess. This brought both of them back to the present. Jaya washed her face and tried to be normal. She occupied her chair and pressed the calling bell. Kanchan also calmed down. On hearing the bell, Jaya's lady-clerk peeped in.

Regaining her composure, Jaya said: "Ratanben, please bring two glasses of water and today's mail, if any." The lady-clerk noticed the tearful eyes of both and was astounded. She returned with the glass in a tray in a moment. Taking a glass from the tray, Jaya said: "Ratanben, this is Kanchanben, my close relative. Tell the mess people to send two lunch plates to my room. Kanchanben will also join me." While giving instructions to Ratan, Jaya was trying to decipher the mixed feelings on the face of Kanchan.

When Ratan left, she told Kanchan: "Don't feel bad. Later we will talk leisurely. Please wait till I have a cursory look at today's mail. We shall leave for my room then."

Kanchan suddenly remembered: Three hours have passed. Talakchand and Zaverbhabhi have not returned yet. I am supposed to join them for lunch. It is about 2.00 p.m. already. The last bus for Jasapar is at 4.00 p.m. I feel I should let them go. I shall stay with Jaya as I am meeting her after a long time. What to do? Samta will take care of Aruna and Kartik. Let me stay here for a night. I shall leave only tomorrow evening. But what will Talakchand feel? He may feel, that though I had no acquaintance here, not even a watchman known to me, now I have a very close relative from nowhere. Talakchand may not feel that way. This may be a figment of my imagination. How deeply he cares for me! How can I tell them that I shall stay here and you may leave?" She explained her dilemma to Jaya. She said: "Let them come first, we shall decide thereafter."

Talakchand returned by 2.30 p.m. Kanchan introduced Jaya to him: "This Gruhmata happened to be my relative....Belongs to Karachi and we know each other since Partition days."

Talakchand was a little surprised. But before he could utter a word, Jaya explained: "As you are known to Kanchanben, you are

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welcome here. Lunch is ready and we were waiting for you only. And...where is your wife?"

Talakchand was awe-struck and could utter only this much: "As you have met, I see God in you. We will be highly obliged if Kanchanben's work is done. This is important." He continued, "My wife is not here but we must attend to Ben's work. My wife had her lunch in a hotel and I had my brunch. She is waiting for me at the goldsmith's shop. The trustee is out of station and will come only tomorrow. Kanchanben, what should we do?"

"Brother, whatever you feel. If you do not mind, I shall stay here tonight, see the trustee tomorrow and return by an evening bus. Convey this message to the children. Samta is there, she will take care of them."

Talakchand had a host of questions in his mind but he didn't ask any. As he walked away, it seemed as if, he was relieved of a burden. Jaya and Kanchan looked into each other's eyes and saw they were glittering. Age permitting, they would have danced freely but it was not befitting either. Relaxed at last, they dreamt of enjoying it.

Jaya's room was neither big nor small. Just enough for her lonely self. There was a small cot, a small writing table, a rug to sit on and a pile of files. Jaya bore the heavy responsibilities of the Institute. There was also a small open bathroom and a water pot in a corner and kitchenwares in the other: a brass stove, a metal vessel, rusted tin boxes for tea and sugar, a strainer and a pair of pincers. In an open cupboard there were four pairs of clothes and a number of books. Be it a single man or woman, one dose not enjoy domesticity. The things in the house lose their relevance, too.

Jaya used to dine in the mess but whenever there were guests, she ordered dishes to the room. Guests were rather rare. They were either office-bearers of the Institute or sometime an education inspector from the government.

Ratan was surprised as she had seen none of the guests of Gruhmata here yet. People only knew that her husband was in Pakistan and she had no relatives here in India. None had ever seen her husband nor his photograph.

When Kanchan was getting ready for lunch, she heard: "Zarinaben, I have lunch plates in both of my hands. Kindly help open the

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door." Jaya immediately stood up and obliged, saying: "Ratanben, you should not carry lunch plates in both of your hands. It becomes difficult to manage."

The dialogue came to an end but Kanchan's curiosity had not abated. What did she hear? She asked Jaya :

"Who is this Zarinaben here?"

"I"

"You?!" Shell-shocked Kanchan blurted out.

"Yes, bhabhi. sometimes men have to imitate God for reincarnation. Burying Jaya, I am reborn as Zarina. Let us finish our lunch first. I will tell you everything in detail. But, O sister, you won't mind my company for lunch, would you?"

"How dare you say that? It does not matter to me whether you are Jaya or Zarina. After a long while, I have regained my old self. I had lost myself in search of your brother. I have to strive hard doubling my efforts assuming the role of a father as well. I am hopeful that my other half would also be found." Her eyes flooded with tears of everlasting hope. Kanchan continued, "If on hearing you called by the name Zarina my affection for you dries up, then take it from me that if it were so my love for you would have been shallow."

Jaya could not control her tears. During lunch, Kanchan narrated happening of the last fifteen years since Jaya had left in great detail. But the constant, looming fear, sleepless nights and withheld tears cannot be expressed in any language or script of the world! On learning about death of Devshanker, her father, Jaya sobbed incessantly.

"I am the sinner. I am responsible for my father's death. Bhabhi, tell me, how can I reveal my real self?"

After lunch, Kanchan relaxed and Jaya went out to attend to the remaining office-work. By evening at sunset they were at the temple of Ranakdevi. On the banks of Dharam lake, in the last rays of the setting sun, Jaya began her own tale:

After the stay of three days at Devvilla, Lalita had, after making her swear an oath of secrecy, told Jaya about her underground activities. She was drawn to Lalita's romantic and adventurous story. Lalita used to say: "What is the meaning of human life? To study, marry and bear children only? I know this itself is not an easy task,

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too." Jaya was attracted towards this new path instead of the drudgery-filled married life. She had also an urge within to do something new, something meaningful. Lalita's grand presentation had the effect of blowing away the heaps of ash covering the burning embers. Lalita used to meditate at midnight in the wee-hours.

Jaya also joined her. It was a half an hour session. Actually, Lalita was receiving instructions from the leader of the movement on a secret radioset and passing on to him vital informations during this session. Slowly, Jaya assumed to be master of herself, a leader, who can lay down her life for the motherland.....

Lalita received this message an evening before she was to escape: "Tonight, in the Diamond Club on Havabander Road, there is a birthday party of city's white-skinned police commissioner. We have to reach there exactly at 2.15 for clean-up operation. May goddess Bahurupee bless us all."

Jaya also listened to the message but could not make head or tail of it. Lalita explained "By throwing a bomb, we are to kill all white officers. Disguising ourselves in the garb of various goddesses, we have to reach there."

Jaya still had a question in her mind, "What is the importance to 2.15 in the night," to which Lalita replied, "That white-skinned officer must have been born at that time and may cut his birthday cake at that time in the presence of all invited guests."

That night, Lalita and Jaya set off one o clock after midnight.

As instructed, they had disguised themselves as goddesses. They had not kept any cash with them. Jaya had gold ornaments of nearly half a kilogram preserved by Anasuya. She was wearing a dazzling crown, as if the goddess had really come out to play Garba during the Navratri Festival. Lalita was another goddess – Mahakali – with sprawling hair, long tongue hanging out of the mouth, black costumes, trident in one hand and a head seveved from the body in the other. Anyone who saw her alone in darkness would be scared to death. There was little traffic on the road. A woman walking alone on the road at this hour would be looked at with suspicion. But as they were two, none suspected anything. When both were about 50 meters away from the Diamond Club, Lalita saw something like lightning. Suddenly, she caught hold of Jaya's hand and turned to a bylane. But as they spotted mounted police, Jaya pushed Lalita in one direction

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and herself took the other. Jaya could not understand anything. She only thought something unexpected has happened as Lalita was frightened. She hid herself behind the neem tree and began to watch what was happening. None was behind her. But after a while, she heard bullets being fired. Jaya was now scared. Was Lalita shot?....She could not think further.

Slowly the hoof-falls of the horse was heard from farther and farther away. She came forward from behind the tree and ran in the direction Lalita had taken earlier. In the darkness, she felt as if she was in a cesspool. She stopped as she slowly began to see the ground in the darkness; she stood in a blood-pool and Lalita's dead body riddled with bullets lay near her legs. The man's-head which was in her hand lay at a distance. For Jaya this was the first encounter with death and here it was the deadliest. Gangaba had a natural death. And she was old and paralytic—neither could she move, nor speak. She was happily relieved by the death. But this gruesome murder of Lalita! She tried to clench her fist but could not stop trembling. Her whole body was perspiring. Lalita was her only support; she too had now disappeared. What was she to do now? Tears were frozen in the eyes and could not roll down. She tried to drag Lalita's dead body to a corner but she heard the hoof-falls again. Lo, there was a mounted police. She threw down her crown and pulled down her saree on to her face. She started running. She turned into a bylane but it proved to be a blind alley. Now she couldn't turn back as the hoof-falls were coming nearer and nearer. Desperate as she was, she knocked at the last house; slowly the door opened and an old lady was before her eyes.

"Save me, my mother. Save me." Uttering these, she fell down on the threshold itself. When she regained consciousness after two hours, that old lady narrated what had transpired. Even today, whenever she remembers the incident, its memory brings tears and smiles simultaneously. The old lady had said then: "What should I tell you, my daughter. You fell on me as if you were a dead body. My elder daughter-in-law helped lift you up and put you in bed. Anis brought a waterpot and as I was to sprinkle water on your face I heard the hoof-falls and a knock on the door. I was frightened. For a moment I thought these devils will terrorise us and there will be violence before they take you away with them. Uncertainty

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prevailed. And this shameless white police, ready to abuse and arrest us and our own native police following in their foot-steps! They can commit any sin and are not afraid of even Allah. How will they defend themselves on the Day of Reckoning? I prayed to Allah and threw the veil on top of you. When I opened the door, the mounted police was before me.

They entered and searched our whole residence inside out. I had thrown the veil on you and you were helped to sit in a chair. When they asked me who you were, I introduced you as my younger son's wife Zarina. Dear daughter, Allah may not pardon me but I uttered untruth just to save your life. Oh Almighty, please forgive me....."

The family of this old lady remained awake for the whole night. Jaya was pressed to confess the real details. She seemed to be the daughter of the parents of a good family and could be sent back to her parents, they thought. But what could Jaya say? She had escaped from her home. And she couldn't return too. And if at all she thought of returning, what would be the fate of that revolutionary family? She had taken wrong and hasty step but now she had no right to drag her family and brother in that direction. She only continued to murmur:

"I want to go to Calcutta... My husband must be waiting there for me. Calcutta...Calcutta..."

Next morning, on the way to the Railway station Jaya asked for a veil and also accepted Zarina....as her own name.

Translated from Gujarati by Dankesh Oza

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Authorspeak: Kamleshwar

We are the inheritors of a grand civilization. Add 5000 years of civilization to your age. Our writings would be linked to a larger Indian tradition, its connotations and reality. This reality is not of the struggle of civilization and thought, but of the identity associated with culture. This is the truth of our oriental humanism. This truth doesn't believe in aggression; it believes in prosperity and friendliness.

In these times of creative exuberance, we have fallen victims to the process of globalization and moral decay. Because of these storms we, the creative writers, hurt and distracted, are out of the havens of our creativity. It may be Iraq, Bosnia, Chechnya or Bali Island! Everywhere our children, families and neighbours are being killed. The sympathy of our country is with every suffering country; but it is a pity that we have been displaced in our own country.

Because of globalization, human values cherished in literature like sensitivity, compassion and sympathy have vanished. We are being told through signals to compromise. The word culture teaches me that creativity can never compromise. It never compromises with the creator. This is the world of our soul and faith. Only our faith would keep us attached to every defeated person who is lying unconscious, smeared with blood and broken dreams. This is an age of the ideological *Mahabharata* of our democracy, and we have to count the living persons, not the dead ones. We have to keep alive our words and meanings. Because, words which have not sold their honour, would rebuild this country. I find myself in the community of these word-crafters.

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From the Award-winning Book *Kitne Pakistan*

Kamleshwar

No More Pakistans/No More Balkans

6

It has been ages past. The human emperor Gilgamesh has not since returned with the remedy—deliverance from death.

But the passion so spontaneously explored by the divine slave girl Runa and the primordial man Ekindu had no fear of death. It had come to life in humanity, enlightened and stayed into it. It was immortal. No fire could incinerate it. Air could have not blown it away. Nor could any weapon neutralise it. The ocean could not be its watery grave ... It had come to be established as incontrovertible a fact as death, the day the inscription – 'I lie in wait for you' was found inscribed on the stonewall of an Egyptian temple with some pointed metallic object.

It was the maiden story of human love. It was after this love story that the pyramids of Egypt were built. Greater and older than the history of the Pyramids is the history of human love. The exclusive moments between Runa and Ekindu, after the realisation of desire when they sought to seek their respective existence in each other's eyes, and attained it, stand for the eternal story of love that has since survived.

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7

This story of Buta Singh and the 'earthen' fairy subscribes to that story.

The scorching desert of Rajasthan—

There came an abusing cry—of the making of Pakistan....

The sky was not as merciful as usual. It had not, in its store, a drop of water. There were ill forebodings in nature and the earth was to experience no rains but a flow of human blood.

Amid these forebodings, Buta Singh, a 50-55 years old Sikh farmer, was returning from his barren fields. He had three brothers who had not let him marry to avoid further fragmentation of their fields. He was still an unproductive soul like those infertile sandy fields that had not experienced even a drop of rain. This Buta Singh was returning from his barren fields to his house.

The voices reverberated:

- There comes Pakistan....
- Narae Taqbir...Allaho-Akbar
- Jo Bole So Nihal...Sat Sri Akal
- Har Har Mahadev

Buta Singh was oblivious of all those premonitions. Nor could he comprehend what nature had in store for this year of freedom; that it was to spill blood and there were to be no rains during that year of freedom. Buta Singh was treading on his way in the sand. He would form that track every day and it would be erased daily. He would be in no hurry to rush home. No body longed for his return there.

That moment, behind him, he heard a terrified young tender voice—Save me...save me....

Buta Singh turned back. A sixteen-seventeen year-old girl was rushing towards him to save her honour. Her clothes were reduced to shreds. Her hair disheveled, she was panting heavily. A violent-looking young man was chasing her. The semi-naked young girl fell at Buta Singh's feet...save me...save me.....

This beast wants to rob me of my honour...Saying this, she got up and clung to Buta Singh, panting.

Where will you escape to? Giving the girl a questioning look, the young man turned to Buta Singh—Hand her over to me!

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- No...I will not hand her over to you!

- You will have to...She has been my share of the spoils.

- Your share...Buta Singh looked at him obliquely—your share?

- Yes! Hindus and Muslims have partitioned. Pakistan has emerged.

- Where has Pakistan emerged?

- Across that 'Tisri Dhani' – a line has been drawn for the creation of Pakistan. After the line has been drawn, this girl has fallen to my lot. I have wrested her from a convoy...Hand her over to me.

No! Said Buta Singh, giving that half-naked girl cover behind him. Damn with the line... There can be no discrimination on the basis of Hindu-Muslim divide as far as the honour of a woman is concerned.

The young man gave Buta Singh a hard look—you can pay a price for this woman's honour if you want.

- Pay a price! Buta Singh was confounded—Are you ready to sell her?

- Yes

- For how much?

- Fifteen hundred cash! The young man staked the price too high to Buta Singh's status.

- O.K. I'll manage this much...come along. You have to come along to my house.

The trio proceeded home, the violent young man in front of Buta Singh and the girl following him, head bent.

Reaching home, Buta Singh kept thrusting his hands in some old earthen pots in search of money but there was none he could lay his hands on. The half-naked girl withdrawing to herself, wrapping herself into her own arms had bundled herself into another corner on the ground. Finally taking cover of her, Buta Singh, digging out sand with his hands, unearthed an earthen pot. He took out a small bundle tied with a dirty piece of cloth and started counting mutilated old rupee notes. There were a few coins too. In the end, the money came out full.

The violent young man counted the money, kept it in his turban

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and said, looking at the girl—You will get along comfortably. He is too old.

The girl kept sitting huddled. And after he went, only said —Why did you give that cruel man such a large sum for my sake?

Buta Singh said nothing.

The sun was setting. Then came a cropper as the night dawned. The girl was alarmingly nude. The day was done, but what for the night. Buta Singh tried to settle it—there is no cloth, you take my lungi.

You will get naked! The girl said helplessly. Buta Singh suddenly felt shy.

You are right...I have an idea...saying Buta Singh started drawing the sand out with his hands to make a pit.

The girl understood the contraption. She silently watched him making the pit.

- Will you bend your legs or stand straight? Buta Singh asked.
- How will I sleep if I were to keep standing...?
- It is enough then... Buta Singh declared examining the depth of the pit. The girl continuing to be in huddle helped herself slowly to the pit on her soles and lowered herself into the pit half lying on her back. Buta Singh poured the sand back into the pit covering her body up to her neck and said—it will do!

The girl for once gave a hearty look to Buta Singh. He too returned the looks full, pretending to scratch his beard with a comb. In the end, she could steal a faint smile and lowered her eyes. Covered with the sand up to her neck, she looked like an 'earthen' fairy.

- O, I am yet to ask your name... tell me? Buta Singh wanted to know.
- Zenib
- Village ?
- Maniyar Dhani!
- Caste?
- Hindu Rajput!
- Religion?
- Muslim!
- How did you fall into his hands?
- We were migrating to Pakistan leaving our homes...That way, we had everything. My father engaged in crop sharing and we lived

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comfortably. We had cows, buffaloes, oxen. We do not eat cow meat, nor the meat of buffalo or ox.... Everything was going fine. Then came this line of Partition and it became difficult to live in Dhani. All the Muslims of Dhani village set off in a convoy to reach across that line. However, it was difficult to comprehend why we were leaving ...Quarrels, altercations and verbal duels were always there... I was trailing the carvan when he waylaid me. Stripped me half-naked. Somehow, I wriggled out of his hold and ran when I saw you...While narrating her woe, the 'earthen' fairy looked at Buta Singh gratefully.

As the day dawned, Buta Singh's brothers came to know that some girl had arrived at Buta Singh's house. The elders of the village opined—Buta Singh! When this girl has come to your house, why don't you marry her?

Buta Singh was on the way to the bazaar four miles away. Setting off, he replied the elders—let me first buy clothes for her.

8

When Buta Singh went to buy clothes for Zenib, Pakistan had become a reality. The forecasts had proved true. A blood bath was going on.

The 'earthen' fairy was still buried in sand.

Buta Singh had gone four miles off to buy her clothes.

The emperor Gilgamesh is still retreating farther and farther into the sea of oblivion.

And the vulture on Prometheus's shoulder is still pecking at his flesh.

Till the emperor Gilgamesh returns, while succumbing to the certainties of death, man has contrived for himself a cyclic transformation of life. He manages to perpetuate his wishes, promises and dreams in his progeny before disappearing. This cycle has incessantly been perpetuated since then, waiting for Gilgamesh to cap death all. As yet, he is engaged in negotiating centuries of time, wading continuously through waters advancing into the nether- most world, fathoming its depths. At intervals, he calls upon mankind not to lose patience, and says — the poisonous snake and the scorpions

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are still coiled around me. Their stings have turned me blue. However, the sea stands by like a true friend. It carries out the tradition of love set in with the sacrifice made by Ekindu. That is why those depraved gods have cursed the sea to salinity so that its waters are of no use to mankind. But there is nothing to worry. I will keep descending into its depth for centuries, to reach Jiusuddu of Shuruppak. Who knows how many more sea-years it will take. Keep neutralizing death till then; keep your continuity with the earth, coalesce into your progenies to outlive death...I will certainly return with the remedy...wait till then...

Wait... wait...

The universe reverberated with that voice.

- I'll come with the remedy...Wait for me...

The divine world grew restless again.

Zibanoot, the second god of Babylonia panicked. Kronos, the god of Mesopotamia and Anu of Sumer were nervous. Eros, the son of goddess Aphrodite came out of his palace to reconnoitre the direction of the voice. The god Zeus too came cut. The twin brothers Caster and Polux also came out. Goddess Hera along with the immortal goddess Europa and Leda were out, frightened. The goddesses Astria and Philera were ill at ease. The god of Egypt Hapi grew impatient.

The gods and goddesses of all civilizations looked frantically for Gilgamesh's voice. They ordered their respective angels and divine messengers—go and trap that voice.

They hunted all the four directions but Gilgamesh's voice was not to be found.

They came back failed and frustrated. At this, Zeus thundered — search again wherever the voice be.... It is necessary to stifle this voice...Our world will perish if this rebellious voice is not captured...It is essential to imprison this voice.

Listen to the voice of reason! This was Prometheus groaning, who had alleged to have 'sinned' by stealing fire for man from the palace of Zeus...the fire which the gods had solely arrogated to themselves.

All the gods along with Zeus stared. Accused of stealing fire, imprisoned for centuries, Prometheus stood fettered in chains. The vulture of Zeus sitting on his shoulder was pecking at his flesh.

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All the pieces of flesh lying on the floor of the prison were writhing in pain.

The frightened gods saw Prometheus with contempt and spoke in a body—You are fit only to be condemned... a thief and a criminal.

You vainglorious and lecherous gods! Prometheus said wiping his oozing wounds. You are the oppressors. You have camouflaged the perennial and unrestrained power of nature with an aura of sanctity and arrogated to yourself its descent and priesthood. That unrestrained and uninterrupted superpower is actively revealing its mysteries to man. It is not under your subjugation.

Death! Death! Death to him, the gods shouted.

Don't shout! Prometheus said—Give me death, do anything, you cannot capture Gilgamesh's voice. The voice has fled. Prometheus declared—Runa with love, friendship, peace and revolution, has fled along with Gilgamesh's voice. You cannot catch her. You hardly needed these values. So, she has set off for the mortal world along with them! See! Her descent into the mortal world!

9

The terrified gods cast their looks down on earth. They were confounded. All white-winged celestial birds were landing on the earth with Runa writ on their feathers. Apart from Anjan and Chandravak, the seven progenies of Kunk were also there. There were peacocks, Shakunt, Saras, Neelkunth, Davak, the five-coloured huns, Mahabak, Pandu, the water crow, Suparu, Dhunesh and all the members of the Krounch family with all their offspring.

During this descent, birds of all hues had joined her. Nature had mellowed with their songs and singing voices. Getting off the wings of the birds, Runa at once headed for Adim Adib's house. She reached his door. Before she could declare its presence, she saw that all kinds of impulses were already there...and a deeply troubled Adib was sitting grabbing his head. An orderly standing courteously on his right side was calling the impulses one by one allowing them present themselves before Adim.

But then, raising his head, Adib gave Runa a look and asked – What impulse are you?

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Adibe Alia! I am the impulse of the abode of depraved gods. I have come with the values of love, peace and revolution for humanity and the voice of Gilgamesh. When gods of all civilizations wanted to capture it, I had concealed it in my navel. It is the greatest trust of man... their fearless voice. I have come to hand you over this. Acknowledge it, for, a simple, true, fearless and veridical soul like Adib alone can keep it alive and preserve it for centuries after centuries...

Accepting the gift of voice from Runa, he assimilated it in his veins and pleaded with Runa to sit.

As she sat, the twangs of the impulses increased... there were impulses...impulses...and more impulses. In the end, looking at an impulse, he asked, What impulse are you?

Adibe Alia! I am the impulse of Kosovo, settled across Danube river from where centuries ago, you had come to settle down at the Indus....The Danube area recalls you all...the corpses there recall you with grief and pain.

What tragedy has befallen them as our progenies recall me? Adim asked the impulse.

...A fierce war is going on in this ancient-most valley of civilization. This war is unilateral.

...A unilateral war!

... Yes Adibe Alia! On our lands, a demon NATO has taken birth. Another demon across the sea is its head. They have jointly attacked Serbia and Yugoslavia and turned me into a burial ground. Serbia is a sovereign part of my Yugoslavia and Kosovo is a part of that independent land of Serbia... but the demons of NATO and their leaders have ruined us to further their own interests... The demons are performing their death dance; they want to break my sovereign state and perpetuate their control over Kosovo.

But why! After all, what is this policy of occupation? Adim asked the spirit.

Adibe Alia! Occupations are meant to break souls...the souls are then divided... they are indoctrinated with a sense of indifference to their own cultures and then the commercial exploiters sap the divided nations whole hog...These divided nations are reduced to markets vulnerable to exploitation ...History and culture dance to the tune of oppressors antithesising their own divided part, inviting

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their own demise... This is the machination followed by these sub-cultures to arrest the advance of big civilizations and subjugate them...Their fields yield only guns and gunpowder, the means to their ends... Subjected to these circumstances, Kosovo has witnessed the death of lakhs of its progeny and is lying deserted as a result of displacement of lakhs of its people. Lakhs of refugees are wandering about here and there. NATO missile attacks are going on unabated unilaterally...oil depots and chemical factories are up in flames...The whole environment and your ancient river Danube have turned poisonous...Death is madly haunting the corridors of life...Lakhs of innocents are dying untimely deaths in Serbia.

Why didn't anybody stop these savage demons? Adib enquired and then asked angrily—Where is the Secretary General of UNO that Kofi Annan? Let him be produced in the court.

- The Orderly proceeded carrying the orders.

- Sir, it has been the same story in the valley of Dajla Farat, another impulse appealed, seizing the opportunity.

- Annan will have to explain this too... Wait for his appearance, asked Adib.

In the meanwhile, other impulses grew restless and fluttered when Adib ordered peace and turned to Runa—You handed me this voice of Gilgamesh, many thanks for that...I have assimilated it safely in my blood; until mankind lasts and the blood runs in his veins, this voice shall live.

Watch out Adib! That is why anti-human forces will unleash a chain of oppression and blood bath, said Runa. Though their culture is sick, depraved and fallen, these cowards can stoop still further low to capture the voice. So Adib, watch out!

Then appeared the Orderly. Kofi Annan was not with him. Seeing him alone, Adib was roused with anger – you did not bring Kofi Annan!

Sir, As soon as he came to know you had summoned him he developed a severe pain in his chest and he complained of difficulty in breathing. Therefore, for the time being he has been admitted in a hospital. In such a situation, it was impossible and unadvisable to have brought him.

Then go and take up with him the question of massive pain that develops in the heart of mankind time and again and the

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continuous difficulty it experiences in breathing... He was handed over the task of betterment of the world but now it does seem that he has even abdicated his moral responsibility so earnestly entrusted to him, playing up to a super power... To this alone owes this phase of division and irrepressible repression. Remind him in case he has forgotten that the wars that have taken place and are on in the guise of economic progress are proving to be the cause of ruin of many a country and culture... Giving rise to a dark history and blind faith, they become messengers of extermination of man and mankind. As long as these wars continue, crippled societies will continue to take birth... A system of illegal and immoral resources will continue to evolve in the world in order to make a living... the fishes in rivers like the Danube will continue to die. The fields soaked with human blood will not yield grain but poison and thorn apples. And the women of these societies will be condemned to rape and malevolence... their progenies will be afflicted with psychological disorders and other maladies. Vice will prevail in the garb of virtue and a despot wearing a garland of human heads will abrogate the all-powerful centralized throne. Ask Kofi Annan whether he was given over-all human control to come to this pass only!

Adibe Alia! I'll carry your strong message along but may not be able to make him understand its niceties. It's better that you make him understand it when he appears in your court.

I know he will never venture in here...as it is the eternal court of a man's heart. Those who trade in law and religion in the name of law, dare not appear in this court.

Runa then sought permission to leave. Giving her permission, he only tried to put her on her guard — the gods will never forgive you. Prometheus accused of stealing fire for man has still been undergoing punishment for centuries...I shudder to think of the punishment they will mete out to you for stealing the voice of Gilgamesh. I wish you well.

- Accepting the good wishes, she disappeared. And with that, the twitter of the impulses increased.

- Adim's ear drums were ready to split apart. He covered his ears with both his hands. Then he asked the Orderly.

- Let us move somewhere else, take me somewhere away from here....Anywhere.

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- Where Adibe Alia? The noise outside is all the more greater...cries, mass killings, rape, wailings, kidnappings, flesh of still-borns, swollen, rotting corpses, flies swarming all over them, hyenas tired of eating the flesh of the half-alive and the dead, dogs, vultures and the scene of blood bath!

This is even a starker reminder of the Great floods thousands of years ago.

Come what may....Take me away from here. And the Orderly was but to obey him. Seating Adib in a boat, he started crossing over the great ocean of blood. The blood was too thick to ferry the boat in. Having gone very far, the Orderly saw a mount of corpses. He was too tired to row in the ocean of blood. He tied the boat with a mount of corpses. Adib sat in the shade of that mount. Something reverberated in his ears. He gestured the orderly to come near him and asked. Do you hear these echoing words?

- No Sir...

But my ears echo with the words of Jayshankar Prasad. On the crest of snow-mountains, sitting in the cool shade of the mount...a man with wet eyes...was a witness to the progress of that great devastation! I hear even goddess Innova of Sumerian civilization. She is crying—is my progeny meant to die? And to die such an unnatural death?

The Orderly stared at him.

I hear the gods of Latvian-Greek tales. They have gathered on Mount Olympus to escape the Great Floods. The supreme father of Christians says—Noah! On the earth, man's wickedness has advanced no end. I will destroy not only the man I have created but all the organisms, since the earth is replete with violence. The ethos of organisms have been debased...I will unleash waters to wreak destruction on all organisms of the earth. I am glad Noah, that in this creation of mine, only you alone stand virtuous. I will save you. So, you build yourself a three-storey ark to escape in. You alone will outlive this Great Flood.

The Orderly saw Adib worriedly.

- Do you recall? Adib asked the Orderly—The god Zeus had opened the sky-gates of clouds for the destruction of the earth. Then Yu in China set the course for streams of water to fall into the oceans and trapped the earth of the Chi river in his arms so

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that after the devastation, he could sow seeds to grow food for man...Do you remember?

No Sir... I don't remember anything as such, the Orderly said indifferently.

You may not remember! However, can no body in our age paint himself another Yu who can avert this blood bath?

Sir, Gandhiji did try a lot but he was isolated.

Yes...said Adib...When there is a fire-ordeal after this blood bath, which is not far, we will need the non-violence of Gandhiji and the remorse of Einstein.

- Which Einstein?

- That Einstein, who, revealing the mysteries of nature, had found out a chain reaction of energy, Mahmud Ali! It is beyond comprehension, why every great man's life culminates in a tragedy... Why do demons take birth after the emergence of a big ideology or inventions.... At the time of great floods, the demon Hayagriva had stolen the 'Vedas'. Then the 'Shrangi' fish had cast a spell of life on Satyavrata living only on water and the same 'Shrangi' fish had delivered the knowledge of the 'Vedas' by exterminating Hayagriva and thus saved the world of letters. Then alone Satyavrata met Shradha after the devastation, and mankind came into being. All civilizations bear testimony to the Great Floods but we alone are witness to this blood bath...only this earth is soaking, this ocean of blood to level it... the layer of blood is seeping into the earth...humanity is on the retreat...but who knows after this catastrophe, whether the universe will evolve or not? And if it were to, what will be its form?

Why do you worry Adibe Alia... like the primordial man Satyavrata and Shradha, a Buta Singh and a Zenib have taken over this task.

Translated from Hindi by B.S. Walia

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From the Award-winning Book *Kavirajamarga Mattu Kannada Jagattu*

K.V. Subbanna

Essays on Kannada—The Language and the Culture

When I landed upon this world all of a sudden, my mother and my close relatives fed Kannada words through my lips and through those words alone could my mind slowly grasp this world. Words provided to me names (of all things); the names induced shapes. Those forms then, and the Kannada sounds that shaped them, are my world. Even as of this moment, without those sounds how could there be any comprehension? How could there be any response to stimulus? I would then be deaf, blind, mute, merely a stone. There would be no world at all.

The land that we now identify as Karnataka stands firmly on the Deccan plateau, the most ancient and stable part of the Indian sub-continent.... In comparison, the Himalayas are still in their infancy. Granite cannot be found on the Himalayas. It will take many millions of years yet for the range to attain the maturity by when granite could crystallize on it. To the west of this land lie the sea and the adjacent elongated coastline. Like a threshold to the northern part of India that is beyond the Vindhyas, this region is a bridge between the southern and northern parts of India. There is archaeological evidence that there has been human inhabitation in the region for over half a million years. As a communicative bridge between the

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north and the south, being open to the western continents through its western sea-face and given its long record of human habitation, the region has been undergoing innumerable exchanges and syntheses of peoples, ethnicities, religion and languages. It is for this reason that the Kannada idiom of the day has assimilated many peoples, tribes, ethnicities, religions and cultures.

We Kannadigas are a universal people (*viswamaanavas)* and our Kannada, which is a synthesis of innumerable languages of the world, is a universally-conceived language. And so ours is not merely a Kannada "well" (with the vision of a just small circle of sky overhead), but a Kannada world, a Kannada universe.

This is not to say that it pertains to Kannada alone. Every language in every society in the world is in reality shaped by a similar process and all of them are universal tongues of universal people....

Kavirajamarga jointly written by the poet Srivijaya and King Nripathunga, reflects on how to invoke and assimilate the universal world on the palm of one's hand and create a boundary-less virtual universe called Kannada. A small couplet in the work describes it charmingly: "From the Kaveri up to the Godavari is this land, a nation *(janapada)* imagined in Kannada." Meaning that the land and the nation are not just a geographical unit evident in its time, but that it is an "imagined" one; inside what is known as "Kannada" – inside that shell, you may say – it is "experienced." So, "Kannada" means a mental universe, a vision, a manifestation; initially formed in mindscape and then constructed. Besides which this is '*vasudha-valaya-vileena, vishada-vishaya-vishesham.' Vasudha* (Earth) is merely a *valaya* (division) of the infinite universe; and the *vishaya* (country) known as *kannada* is *vileena* (merged) in this Earth, harmoniously coalesced.

But this does not mean that it is subsumed in the division of Earth without its own brand identity. It is a land that is *vishesham* (unique). In addition, it is *vishada* (detailed), as comprehensive as the Earth or the universe. Because this is merged with the division of the Earth, alternatively it could be interpreted that it has actually assimilated the Earth. Even as a mere dot on the Earthscape it has assimilated the Earth itself. It is such an image of 'Kannada' that *Kavirajamarga* has crafted.

...(Speaking of globalisation), what is this global world itself? Where is it? We know all the maps of the world and its geographical

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parts. There are people who fly around the world in airplanes surveying its features by camping in the capitals of many countries. But even for such people, the world that is all-encompassing is ultimately resident in that five-or six-foot extent of the human frame. Finally, the world for these globetrotters too is what their five senses, their minds and intellects can grasp and store in their body frames in pictures and image-constructs. The sun, moon, planets, stars, the unchanging state of the entire universe is just the imagined image. What other could exist for us beyond that which is conjectured and stored within us?

The Kannada world constructed by Kavirajamarga

Kavirajamarga got printed and published for the first time in 1897. It was known then, according to available ancient Kannada works at the time, as the oldest (814–877 AD) and the well-known work of Kannada literature. Now, one hundred years gone by, it retains its pre-eminent status. Although it can be decisively deduced that several Kannada literary works were composed prior to this, none is available as of now. Besides pre-eminence, there are several other points of importance accruing to this work. For this reason, every eminent Kannada scholar of our time (the past century) has undertaken comprehensive research and analytical and critical studies of *Kavirajamarga*.

There have been sufficient scholarly exercises to establish the definite period and definite authorship of *Kavirajamarga*. A majority agrees that in the period 814-877 AD, the eminent king of the Rashtrakootas, Amoghavarsha Nripathunga, ruled the wide stretch of the kingdom between the Kaveri and Godavari rivers from his capital Maanyakheta (today Malakheda). It is possible that the poet Srivijaya, a member of his court, composed this work c.870 AD. But even so, this work is mainly dependent on Nripathunga's aspiration, opinion and guidance, and has emerged after obtaining his ultimate seal of approval.

Scholars have seen that the "form" of the book eludes clear definition. Some feel that it is a translation work, edited and compiled of selections from the Sanskrit works of the southern composer Dandi's (c.700AD) *Kaavyaadarsha* and Baamaha's (c.700 AD) *Kaavyaalankaara*. It is true that with regard to poetics *Kavirajamarga* has excerpted some poems and has them in translation. But barring

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a few such sections, the remaining compositions (about 70 per cent) are entirely original. So, excepting those that continue to be deemed as translation work, all the other scholars treat it as an independent work of *Alankaara* (poetical rhetoric).

Background and Royal Traditions: When a cameraman wishes to effectively and evocatively capture an image to suit his purpose, he must beforehand—1) choose the background against which he will expose his chosen object and 2) decide on a ground and a spot to place his camera. It is from these two aspects that a picture's meaning is formed. To give a broad illustration : The close shot of a grief-stricken woman sitting on the ground gives us one meaning and the long shot of the same woman against the background of a vast burial ground with many graves, with other human forms bent in front of the graves gives birth to an entirely different meaning. Similarly, when a picture is seen from different positions, its meanings could go on changing. One could say this applies to even a literary work. If the picture of *Kavirajamarga* should become clear to us, it must be seen against the background of at least a millennium of the history of Kannada, India and southern India.

...As observed (in the preceding chapters), the Kannada language, script, literature and artistic forms, for seven to eight centuries prior to Nripathunga, together shaped and influenced "Kannada," combining with each other and, alternatively, crafting a vehicle of the community that could equal any other cultured human community or civilization. But this done, the final essential factor that this community required was that of a single administration, a single ruler. It was sovereignty that could provide endorsement to the individual brand of this community.

Had...the politics of conquest-expansionism carried on in the same way (as in the centuries prior to the period), perhaps a distinct Kannada kingdom could never have been formed. It is possible that a decisive stage in the politics of expansionism was reached during the time of Nripathunga. His father, Govinda III, was most desirous of victory. He expanded his kingdom into the biggest one in the history of the Rashtrakootas. On his death, Nripathunga, only 14-year-old then, had to ascend the throne. Upon his elevation, several rebellions reared up. It is said that his paternal uncle, Suvarnavarshakarka,

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quelled the rebellions of the time and protected him. Later too, in his long rule of 63 years, Nripathunga had to spend a big part of it facing many wars and rebellions. On one occasion possibly, his own son too rebelled against him. Besides, it has been suggested that he, not once, but several times abdicated the throne. But ultimately, Nripathunga overcame all his problems and anxieties to successfully establish a Kannada kingdom extending from the Kaveri to the Godavari Rivers.

In the Present – A Point of View: And now to state the chosen ground and position from which I view this background. 'Around 1952, (my) guru S.V. Parameshwara Bhat, over several days, read and explained *Kavirajamarga* to me. In later years, I had re-read it now and then. But the work truly ignited in me in the eighties. The agitation in favour of the Gokak Report (recommending Kannada language education in primary schools) had started or just concluded, as I remember. Reading it at that time, *Kavirajamarga* manifested itself as a wholly new and different work than in the past. It seemed to throw light on and illuminate a stream of history that had mostly flowed right in front of me:

1. The formation of distinct linguistic states in India over a century prior to Independence and the great Indian dream of a union of such states in an independent, sovereign, federal democracy. And, in the wake of Independence, the Partition of the country on the pretext of religious differences;
2. The battles that followed over linguistic states; the fast unto death undertaken by Potti Sriramulu of Andhra Pradesh and his subsequent death; the resulting birth of linguistic states; the founding of a unified Karnataka (erstwhile greater Mysore) in 1956;
3. The Dravida movement, meanwhile, in Tamil Nadu; the threat of a breakaway Dravida nation; the separatist Akali movement; the Kashmir occupation and the fear of its partition;
4. The opposition, in the meantime, to the formation of linguistic states; the argument that language too could make way for divisiveness along lines similar to those of religion, caste and ethnicities; Nehru's discontent,

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disapproval over the formation of linguistic states; differences over the unification of Karnataka from within; "Let there be five Karnatakas:" — the argument made by DVG (litterateur D.V. Gundappa);

5. The border disputes that followed the formation of linguistic states; the rupture of the Kannada land along the four corners, in Belgaum, Bellary, Bangalore, Dakshina Kannada, etc.; the disputes over rivers, displaced populations, related agitations and violence;
6. Separatist agitations in Kashmir, Punjab, Assam and the North-East and support provided to these by foreign countries; army operations, the massacre in Amritsar and the gory retaliatory killings in New Delhi; the birth and growth of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the terrorist movements it spawned; the breakaway creation of Bangladesh and India's incidental encouragement towards its formation
7. The Kannada agitations in Karnataka; (Reports by Commissions) Gokak (Kannada in schools) and Sarojini Mahishi (jobs for people of the state); caste agitations; the movement and riots against Tamil immigrants over Kaveri waters; violent incidents; the protest opposing the *Deccan Herald* editorial against the Gokak Report; the Kannada *Chaluvali* (agitation) movement in Bangalore;
8. The recent separatist cries that have followed in Kodagu, North Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Tulu Nadu, Malnad, coastal regions, etc.

It seemed to me that this series of issues and challenges of history that make us feel so bleak and bewildered and their roots, possibly, in the philosophical grounds and establishment of the Kannada identity, are being addressed by *Kavirajamarga*. I felt that the work contemplates over the methods of analysis and stratagems for reconciliation with these very problems.

There is an element of coincidence too in this. There is a curious link between *Kavirajamarga* and us. The integrated Kannada kingdom that Nripathunga had built during his time disappeared after his passing. Later, a similar Kannada land as seen in the map—

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at least from the Kaveri to the Krishna, if not the Godavari—has been seen 11 centuries later in 1956, in our own times.

The Bond-Nexus between State and Language: With my point of view fixed in the unique context of Kannada today, in the background of that millennium, my focus is firmly on *Kavirajamarga*, not on Nripathunga or some other aspect. Why?

There is the story of Nebrija. Antonio Nebrija (1444-1522 AD) is a contemporary of the famous Queen Isabella of Spain. She had ambitions of expanding the Spanish kingdom. Columbus too was a contemporary. Around the same time that Columbus obtained the queen's approval for an intercontinental voyage of adventure, Nebrija too had submitted a scheme for the queen's approval and support. By then, Nebrija had already written a prestigious book on Latin grammar. Europe was just then entering into the printing age. His book was among the first ones printed and published.

This is the gist of Nebrija's appeal: "The Castellan language used by the subjects of Spain is now changing from place to place without any control. It has disintegrated in hundreds of 'local dialects.' Also, without any restraint, it is changing from day to day. In this way, with the disintegration of language, our empire itself is disintegrating. It is changing at such speed that the history of the queen written in today's language will go waste without communicating to the coming generation. If an empire and its history are to be established, it requires the construct of a stable (official) language. There is the need of a royal and official language of the state that has royal endorsement. I will now clean up the disintegrated language, edit it and compose a grammar for it and in the process create a language of the state. Towards that end, I need the queen's consent and support." Besides, he expounds a formula on the relationship between language and empire: "Language is forever the companion of empire, an eternal fellow traveller."

... What really is "history?" It is something that has transpired long ago, like drops of water in a flowing stream, which can never be grasped in the same way ever again? It really has no existence. Given this, we conceive in the current instant, and with our creative imagination, an 'image' based on extant memories, evidences of the time and believe that to be "history." Which means, history does not exist in reality. Without existence, it is a distortion that takes

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shape in our minds. And it is an imagination that is constructed in that very instant. It cannot establish a direct relationship with the past; it is woven together in the present with the immediate. In truth, it is today's creation.

It is for this reason that my writing, though seemingly dependent on history and its interpretation, concentrates on what could be useful for the present and pertinent to our immediate society in imagining a construct.

Translated from Kannada by Prakash Belawadi

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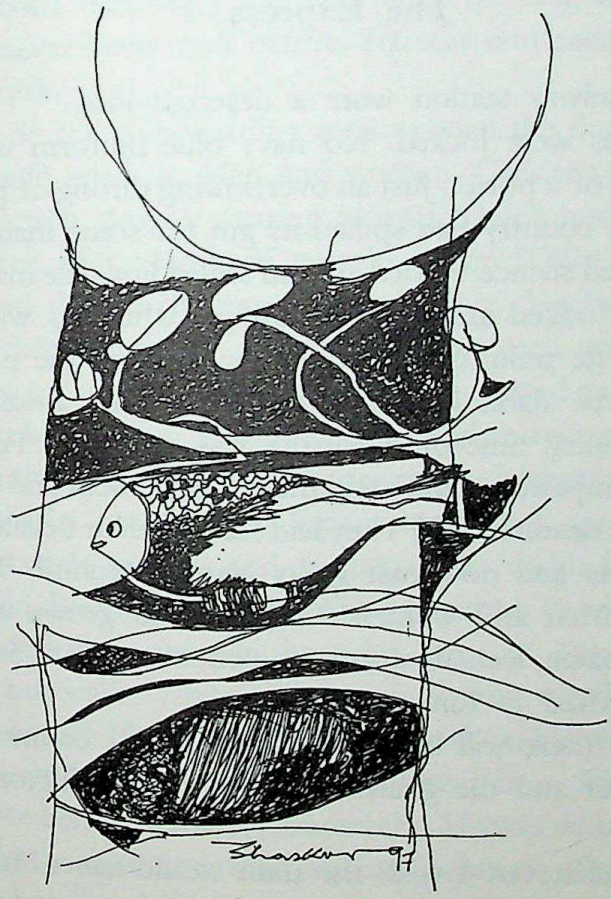

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From the Award-winning Book *Yeli Phol Gaash*

Somnath Zutshi

The Express

The huge railway station wore a deserted look.

The rooms were locked. No navy blue uniform was visible. Nor the red one of a porter. Just an overflowing throng of passengers. As if the whole country had spilled its gut for some inaugural train journey. A hushed silence swirled around sealed lips. Tile man sporting a white goatee looked around penetratingly while his wife gripped his left hand. The train, doors closed, lay hugging the platform. It was getting to be dark, but there were no lights around.

The scheduled time of departure was long past. People wore expressions of impatience and excitement. Excitement and fear. ("Oh! For reaching the destination.") They had secured their tickets discreetly from some touts and now cast guilty glances around. They came from all over. Men and women. Children and grown-ups.

White Goatee leaned against a concrete pillar. Snatches of conversation wafted to him.

"They say there will be no uniforms in this country. Not for the engine driver and the guard. Not for the conductor either. Is that fair?"

"Fair or whatever! I wish the train would move. It is a long, arduous journey."

"I feel hungry. There is neither a shop nor any vend around here."

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And then, in ringing tones, "Shut up! Always hungry. You never get over hunger." The voice strode past. It was but a hazy impression through the mist. Perhaps someone from the new management.

Resting his shoulder against the concrete pillar, legs crossed, White Goatee looked around furtively. His wife had a tight grip on his hand. She seemed shrunken with terror. A middle aged man, sitting on an iron chest alongside, stared on at them. When the woman timidly drew the attention of her husband to this, the man got up and addressed them in a low tone: "I am. . . no, I was a railway guard. The stations have been closed down, uniforms taken away. Everything has been taken away. I am not a thief or a robber."

"Huh!" humphed White Goatee.

Suddenly the platform was swarming with many robust men wielding dumbbell-shaped clubs who ran to and manned the doors of each coach. The train was very long. So long that such a long train had never been seen before. Its rear end seemed to go right into the dusk.

One of the club-wielding men opened the door of the coach ahead. People piled in. Men and women. Children and grown-ups. Many women in *ghunghat* wearing *lehangas*. Children slung across hips, dangling free. Many kinds of people. When White Goatee and his wife entered the coach, they stopped short. No berths! No seats! Some windows boarded up and others secured with metal hasps.

In the overcrowded coach passengers started sweating. The eyes of children bulged out. The tongues of old and young were hanging out. When the door of a big lavatory creaked open, the whole coach was invaded by putrescence. Emanating fumes spread like smoke.

The coach yawned and stretched. Its width increased slowly and doubled. Became threefold. Then fourfold. People cowered. The ceiling conjured up two or three big lanterns like Alladin's lamps appearing magically. White Goatee could now see the club-wielding conductor clearly. He sat on a stool by the door. He was a garagantuan man. He looked like having been inflated by a bicycle pump. He had a big pot belly and shaggy moustache. He was wearing a crochetted cap, red bush shirt and blue striped pajamas. Blunt shoes and a chequered handkerchief worn under the collar completed his getup. Twirling his moustache he arched his eyebrows and with a head gesture signalled the passengers to sit down. Some of them sat on

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rusty chests and some others on rolled up bedding. Some sat on ragged mats and certain others on the bare floor. The *lehanga* clad women sat in the middle. White Goatee and his wife kept standing to one side.

"Cool cucumber. Cool cucumber," a thin voice arose outside. The thirsty were about to get up when the conductor signalled them to sit down, this time with a hand gesture. Extending his thick arm of fourteen cubits past the door, he let it lengthen to the far end of the platform. Grasping a dozen hampers of cucumber he retracted his arm and scattered them amongst the passengers. To White Goatee the cucumbers looked like green fluorescent tubelights primed to explode in the pharynx of clamouring takers. He smiled to himself. The conductor flared his nostrils at him.

There was report-like braying of donkeys and the train began to move. The sound of the moving train frightened the passengers. They had never heard a sound like it. Perhaps a wheel was broken. Or it could be of a hexagonal or octagonal shape instead of a round one. The coach was listing to its right like a boat caught in eddying currents.

The sound subsided slowly as the train seemed to take wing. It started to fly—like a vulture. White Goatee, smiling, said to himself, "This vulture will surely carry us, the meat portions, to our destination across the mountain. It will not devour us at the peak and leave our skeletons there."

The conductor signalled the *lehanga*-clad women to get up. They stood up. He traced a dance movement with a hand gesture signalling them to dance. The women were, perhaps, putting ankle bells on. (No! They had already been wearing them.) They started dancing in a circle around the conductor. Nobody could hear the bells. Much in the same manner as nobody, excepting White Goatee and his wife, could sense the stench. A man sitting to the left of White Goatee whispered to him "This conductor will tread over God-knows-who-all." White Goatee went 'Humph' as if reflecting on something. Then he said, "He, who gets under the wheel, dies. This is not a conductor. This is a wheel of this train...which moves."

The dance wore out slowly as did the passengers. They started dozing. Only the conductor, wide-eyed, fixed his gaze on other exhausted passengers and White Goatee. White Goatee stood to one

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side, his nose covered with a handkerchief, casting an occasional furtive glance at the conductor. A silence reigned in the coach. After a while, the silence was shattered. The wheels of the train created a frightful din again and the train stopped.

"Cool cucumber. Cool cucumber," the same thin voice arose outside. White Goatee shot the conductor an enraged look.

"What is this joke? Where are we?"

The conductor looked at the passengers looking at one another with sightless eyes, murmuring among themselves.

"This is not *that* cucumber vendor. This one belongs to another station. We have implanted plastic tubes in their throats. That is how all cucumber vendors sound alike," the conductor told the passengers. Some colour returned to blanched faces. But it drained again when White Goatee said loudly, "Absolute lies! This is the same station from where we commenced. We are at the very same place." He grabbed his wife's hand, looking at the passengers with a mixture of sarcasm and disdain, and headed for the door.

The conductor blocked his way, but he punched him in the stomach and jumped on to the platform with his wife. He landed on his face. The conductor jumped out right after him, saying, "Where can you run?" He would have hit him with the club but for the train which began to move. The conductor lunged for the iron handle and hung on. White Goatee, still prostrate, saw him hanging thus and said to his wife, "The moment he falls, a wheel of the train will break." Then to himself, "A wheel moves around an axis, like the earth. Is this a stadium with the train moving in a circle around it, like a horse in a mill? Or is it a maelstrom?"

He rose up slowly, holding on to his wife's hand. And started scanning the deserted night.

Translated from Kashmiri by Shantiveer Kaul

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Authorspeak: Nirja Renu

It was 24th of December, 2003 when I heard the news over the radio that my book has been selected for award. I remembered at once my late grandfather Pt. Jeewachh Mishra who wrote the first novel *Rameshwar* in Maithili language. I remembered my late father Pt. Harishchandra Mishra and the litarary forum meetings frequently organised by him at his residence where great poets like Braj Kishor Verma 'Manipadma', Pt. Kashi Kant Mishra 'Madhup', and Raghwacharya Shastri recited their poems. I remembered the attention my Late Mother Ganga Devi devoted to my study; she had created thus a quiet, calm and serene atmosphere that gave me the inspiration to write; she did so ignoring the tendency not to take too much care of such needs of a female child of that age.

I never had social reform as an objective; neither did I intend to deliver a message, whatever I wrote was from my feeling and experience. To depict those feelings in words has been my hobby. When words became poems, essays and stories, I did not understand their worth, but if a soul becomes happy reading them, I can say that Mother Saraswati has endowed me with grace.

My *Ritambhara* is a refined woman who is sensitive to fading flower, the dustfilled lair of the sky and all missing beauties of nature. She sees the paintings of her past, repeats song sung by her mother and feels confident of getting her child awakened. She says that I will preserve my flower, trees, air and the chirping of birds, the song of the cuckoo. Just after midnight, she begins to sing '*Koil je bolay he amma, Ama re Amolia.*' She waits for a happy morning

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From the Award-winning Book *Ritambhara*

Nirja Renu

The Crow

Sir....r....r....—the newspaper was slipped through the chink under the door with the chant 'paper'. I woke up and picked up the newspaper. Puttar, my son, was waiting with a cup of tea. Kaniya, my daughter-in-law, had gone to sleep again after going through the routine of preparing the morning tea. She was weary because of observing fast on the previous day which happened to be a Tuesday.

I glanced through the newspaper. Its front page had photographs of half naked beauty queens—Miss K from Switzerland, Miss D from England, Miss S from Venezuela...and so on. Their grin was vacuous. Mungia, the girl from my village, was definitely more beautiful than these so-called beauty queens. Mungia was undernourished and covered herself with the cast-off clothing belonging to the housewives of rich families in the village. And yet, these beauty queens did not have the grace, the deportment and the gait of Mungia.

Oh! Where have I strayed. Possibly, I have become outdated.

"Hum...um...um... I am going to get your ticket for Ganga Kaveri Express cancelled. You can go after a week by another train." Puttar had a mild request in his voice.

"Let it be. Back home, Dinu is doing all household work alone—his study is being hampered," I hesitated. "He is now twenty plus—he can manage easily without you." I kept quiet.

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7.12.96

I am about to leave Bangalore. Kaniya and Puttar—both are busy. Whatever mother needs — food, tiffin-box, water bottle — this or that should be bought. 'She will not buy anything for herself. Let us get for her' — my children have a prejudice — ahronic one at that. So I felt uneasy. This place is far away from where we live. I live at Allahabad these days. It is some twenty-four hundred kilometres from Bangalore. I am leaving my child here at Bangalore so far away—I think, with trepidation.

My thoughts are racing with the taxi proceeding to the railway station. Is it helplessness because of the imperative to earn the daily bread? No. It is God's blessings. Every one cannot be a scientist. Very few persons are gifted with the faculty to do research in the field of space science....And I am feeling proud; some anodyne...some consolation.

The unusual scene....Mammoth crowds near the Majestic Cinema. It looks like the Chandni Chowk of Delhi. Is it slogan shouting or a strike? No, that's usual at Patna. But these days, Kanpur, Lucknow...even a peaceful city like Allahabad is getting afflicted by this malady.... But why this crowd? People look helpless, there is a small travelling bag, a briefcase and a water bottle in their hands, some of them reclining, some sitting or just stretching their limbs. They are worried. Anxiety is writ large on their faces. As the taxi is approaching the station, the crowd gets thick. We arch our brows, with a questioning look. Puttar says, "Perhaps the train has been cancelled."

"No, I have regularly been following the newspaper. There was no news of cancellation of our train."

"Very well...let us go...." Puttar smiles.

The platform is swarming with the crowd which is not usual for Bangalore. We hear that this is the third day of the cancellation of the train. That means thrice the population of travellers. Reservation of any berth is meaningless. Even then, I enter the bogie pushing the crowd. Puttar is looking for my berth, he carries my bag; my purse and water bottle are with me. Seeing this crowd, Puttar remarks "How will you go? It is forty-eight hours' journey... if it gets delayed....Then...?"

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"No, I must go. If the train leaves, then it must reach the destination too."

We hear the whistle. Puttar steps down to the platform dragging me with one hand and my bag with another. Just as we are alighting, some girls, probably college students, shout "Come along with us aunty—we shall accompany you up to Delhi....It will be difficult to get a berth later...." And, agreeing with them, a man with wrinkles on his face, remarks "at least the train will reach Delhi."

He attracted my attention. Stepping on to the platform, I spontaneously murmured "Kauwa" (crow). I wanted to look back. By that time, Puttar is some two furlongs ahead. He directs me to the exit. I see that the policemen are marching forward with 'lathis' in their hands. We come to know that only those who had tickets for travelling today can do so. Those who had tickets for earlier days would be forced to alight.

Puttar is marching ahead towards the taxi stand.

"I hold the ticket for today" I am protesting. "I could have easily gone today."

"When the lathi is charged on this crowd, that will not discriminate between those who are entitled to travel today and those who are not. Once the commotion begins, a valid ticket has no meaning. Lathi charge means only shouts and bloodshed. Worse, if there is trouble after the train leaves Bangalore, you will be alone... lathi charge will also shed your blood, what will you do?....If there is a lathi charge...if you get senseless...."

Puttar is right. We hire a taxi. We are coming back to the house. I again remember "Kauwa".

I recall my childhood. I was a small girl. My mother told me to worship Tushari. This is the worship of Goddess Gauri (consort of Lord Shiva) by an unmarried girl to earn a good husband. For this worship, *Koha* (earthen cooking pot), *Channi* (small earthen bowl) and *Basani* (small pitcher) whitened with *Pithar* (thin rice paste) were required. These pots—thirty in number—were kept in an ornate manner on *Aripan* (sacred diagrams or decorative designs made on the floor with rice paste) in the northern, eastern and southern sides of the sacred place. On the western side, the unmarried girl had to sit facing east to worship. With prices going up, the number of earthen pots for worship was reduced to fifteen and, nowadays, only

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five are enough. The festival took place on *Tilasankranti* (harvest festival on winter solstice believed to take place on January, 14). For that occasion, four *changeras* (shallow baskets made of bamboo) of *chillaur* (candy balls of rice flake) and one such basket of *tilba* (candy balls of seasame) and one basket of *chillaur* made of flaked rice that has been husked without boiling were required. The oven was lit in a corner of the verandah adjoining the room where the family deity had been enshrined. Lal Kaki, Meena Pisiya, Suthani Maiyan and all the ladies were participating. Mother had gone to the verandah at the eastern part of the inner courtyard to attend to the weighing of rice that had been brought by the woman entrusted with pounding the rice.

"O Tittir, arrange to have *belpat* leaves (leaves of wood-apple) for yourself. It will be needed early in the morning puja," mother told me while getting the pounded rice weighed.

"How do I manage to get that?" I asked.

"Have a handy bamboo pole. Tie a hook at one end. With that hook, bend a bough. Break a bough of wood apple tree and bring it home. Go with Sister," Mother said.

We seldom were permitted to go out of the house. So, I enjoyed going to Gauribagh to bring *belpat* leaves. My sister enjoyed cooking. When I expressed my desire to go out, my sister was in no mood to accompany me leaving the preparation of *chillaur*. I was a little hurt.

I went to Gauribagh alone. There was a big tree of *bel* (wood apple) in the mango orchard. On the right side of the orchard, there was a temple of Shiva and agricultural farms. There was a pond in the middle. Village Siripur was situated at the other side of the pond. The students of Siripur used to come for playing in the open ground beside that orchard. Seeing me pulling the bough with the pole, a fat boy began to sing ' Lo, Lo a thin rat, who has no strength is trying to break the bough with a pole...'

That boy was staring at me and was grinning. That day was inauspicious for me. My sister did not accompany me and that boy was making faces at me. I was infuriated and paid him back by making uglier faces. The boy was enjoying my rage from a distance. I tried to bend the bough with the pole but failed miserably. When I tried my best, the pole just brushed the branch. My miserable

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efforts resulted in my feet getting entangled in my *Ghaghari* (skirt) and my falling flat on my face.

That boy was watching my struggle. He came to me slowly and took the pole from my hands saying, "Why are you trying to bend the bough when you have no strength? See, I will do it only with a single blow."

The branch bent with one blow and a thick bough fell to the ground. I was happy to get *belpat* but had a gnawing sense of failure.

I came back to my house with the bough. Mother asked, "Where had you been for so long?"

"You had told me to bring *belpat* and go to Gauribagh along with sister. I had gone to Gauribagh."

"But your sister is here." Mother raised a question mark.

"I had asked her to go with me but she refused. I went alone."

"Ay, you plucked this bough without any help?" Mother asked, surprised.

"No, a boy plucked this."

"Did you speak to him?"

"I do not remember."

"'Very well, since you have to worship Gauri from tomorrow, you will not speak to any boy; otherwise, Goddess will be angry with you."

"But I had made faces at the boy...." I expressed my apprehension.

"You will not do so in future." My mother cautioned me.

When my sister had finished preparing the candy balls of rice flakes and of sesame, she came to me and was surprised to see the large bough of *belpat*.

"Ay Tittir, have you brought this?"

"Yes." I proudly owned up the achievement.

"Who plucked it?"

"Kauwa."

"Kauwa has plucked it?"

I was a little peeved. Hence, I avoided revealing what had happened in the orchard.

"Ay, these days crows pluck the *belpat* for worship?"

"Show me the Kauwa tomorrow...How is he?"

And the second day, third day...we saw Kauwa. We went to

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Gauribagh for the *belpat* and seeing us, he swiftly climbed the branch of the wood-apple tree and plucked the bough. He never hesitated to climb up and he was so quick that it was almost a flight. "The crow flew" my sister commented. Calling the boy by this name meant we had found a solution. When we shouted "Kauwa," the boy came running to us. He knew well that the girls of the *havelis** were not allowed to speak to other boys and we also knew that if we spoke to any boy, Goddess Gauri would be angry—therefore, no scope for any conversation.

And one day, I cried "Kauwa". There was no response. I again cried "Kauwa". No response. Kauwa was gazing up the sky. "What to do now?" I thought. I did not know his name and could not call him—Goddess Gauri would be angry with us, would not accept our puja if we call a boy. We sought a solution. I threw a brickbat and that hit the boy's head injuring him. Blood started streaming down his face and soon his clothes were red. I wanted to wrap his head with a piece of cloth torn from my own dress but could not do so simply because Goddess Gauri would be angry. I felt helpless. That boy ran away in agony crying "Father...O father."

Sister advised me not to tell about the mishap to any one. Otherwise, mother might scold and beat us up. We were so scared that we did not go to Gauribagh for two or three days.

We revisited the orchard after four days. Kauwa was standing there, perhaps waiting for us. His head was bandaged in white. There was another boy with him. He looked like Kauwa but was thin. That day I did not feel like calling out "Kauwa." My sister told me to shout "Mena"(starling). I shouted "Mena". Mena came to us and taking the bamboo pole from my hand, plucked the bough. I was waiting for Kauwa to be vengeful, to hit us with a brickbat or to hurt us otherwise. But he was cool. He was telling Mena "I must learn by rote the lesson given by the teacher. Otherwise, he may beat me up."

I could see that Kauwa was worried about his homework on that day. He must have been thinking about the homework even on the earlier day. I did not know how to confess that I should not have hurt him and I was repenting for that afterwards.

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* Dwelling house of the affluent

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The man who was advising me not to postpone my journey was certainly Kauwa. The same look and features, but wizened with forty winters.

The taxi reached the house. We had early dinner because we were tired and wanted rest.

.....I see Kauwa sitting in the running train. The train is crowded.

I run to the office of a newspaper. I see strange creatures there. A large number of men and women are working. There are reporters, editors, accountants. But every one is wearing a nose bridle. The strings tied to the nose-bridles were held by a frightful giant. I wanted to converse with the reporters and editors but find that they all are dumb. Everyone is directing me towards the giant. They appear to be telling me that the giant is the main person there. "Whatever you have to tell, you tell him only."

I feel that the giant is controlling all of them. Giving him a questioning glance, I want to ask something, but he himself starts blurting out.

"I am supreme. See, on this earth (pointing at editors, reporters, etc.) and up in the sky."

I look up the sky. I see that a large flag is fluttering—the flag entirely made of money.

"What is this?" I ask.

"My victory flag," he smiles.

"You have so much space — pages after pages-for beauty queens in your newspaper — what they said, what they wore, how they smiled, etc. but not a single sentence for Kauwa. People like Kauwa suffer hunger and thirst. They are homeless and take shelter beneath the trees.They have to contend with the cruel winter and summer winds. They are tormented by merciless downpours during the monsoon. But you could not spare even a small space in your newspaper to inform your readers that the Karnataka Express had been cancelled. Thousands of families back home are awaiting the safe arrival of the passengers scheduled to travel by this train. You never think of their plight."

"Get out...Get out...I do not need any of your lectures... I have my own authority...I have the freedom to decide what to publish...."

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"That is why I urge you to publish what is in public interest. Your paper...."

"I adulate those who finance me. And your common man? Their lives are hell. They exist in the gutter...What can I do for them?"

"And those beauty queens...?" I am agitated

"The big companies...the multinational companies...they are the elite....They mean big money."

That is obnoxious. I hate him. "Then this is the state of your newspaper...The newspaper of free India...."

"Get out you stupid....Go to the banks of the Ganga to preach...."

That abominable person is grinning hideously. I am now scared. I want to run away. Then I notice that Kauwa is sitting in the Karnataka Express. The compartment is filled with smoke. All of a sudden, the smoke envelops the whole train. Gradually, the beauty queens have started to dance on the roof of the train; then they are floating in the sky half-naked and they are casting away the remnants of their clothes and, suddenly, there are the flashes of cameras. My eyes dazzle.

The beauty queens are dancing in the sky and my Kauwa may get burnt. The bogies are full of smoke. That is devastating the Gauribagh of my village, trees are being uprooted mercilessly, the wood-apple tree is wailing in the agony of a violent death. Lord Shiva installed in the temple on the banks of the pond is trying to hide behind the trees. Karnataka Express is full of smoke. I am frightened. My Kauwa will get singed.

"Kauwa" I scream helplessly. Kaniya comes to me running

"What has happened Mother?" Puttar asks.

I am drenched in sweat.

"Ay, what is the matter?"

I wake up.

"You were screaming "Kauwa", Puttar says.

"Get me a glass of water....I am so thirsty."

Translated from Maithili by S.C. Mishra

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Authorspeak: Sara Joseph

We writers are engaged in creative activities at a time when our experience is growing more and more bitter with tears and anxieties. The knowledge that the very existence of human beings and even of the living nature around us is in danger scares us. Even a leaf, a river or a drop of rain now gives us anxieties of loss rather than the joy of communion. All of them seem to be vanishing fast like a wind that never returns. The earth seems to be crowded with vanquished human beings.

Men are turning more and more helpless in the face of various kinds of crises like war, poverty, diverse kinds of fundamentalism, racism, violence in the name of clan and community, epidemics and the mindless exploitation of natural resources. The number of human beings displaced from their native dwellings in the name of industrialization and development is growing day by day. The have-nots discover to their dismay that the future of the world is in the hands of monopoly capitalists. Even the governments of democratic countries like India are reduced to the status of their agents. They suppress all the resistance activities of the people and their struggles for basic human rights labelling them extremist. Our regional communities are losing their identity getting absorbed into the idea of the market and its exploitative culture. Globalisation has already destroyed more than 6000 local languages and dialects. The loss of language means the loss of creativity. People are being robbed of their only means of articulation. Even in the literate state of Kerala, writers and lovers of the mother tongue are growing anxious about the future of Malayalam. It seems to be disappearing from education, daily discourse and the official discourse of the Malayali.

At the same time there are many positive attempts to resist

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these onslaughts through writing all over the world. We can resist the hegemony of the forces of globalisation only through a resurrection of our local identities. This needs a new aesthetics that takes its language, beauty and ethics from the lives of the marginalised.

My novel *The Daughters of Alaha* tells the story of a group of people being continuously displaced from their own soil as a result of urbanization. The novel is a record of their native language, history, economic transitions, politics and culture. By awarding this novel, Sahitya Akademi has recognized the local resistance against the exploitative culture of globalisation, expressed in creative writing. I am happy that the Akademi shares the anxieties and struggles of the deprived sections of humanity that include Dalits, the black tribals, women and the poor.

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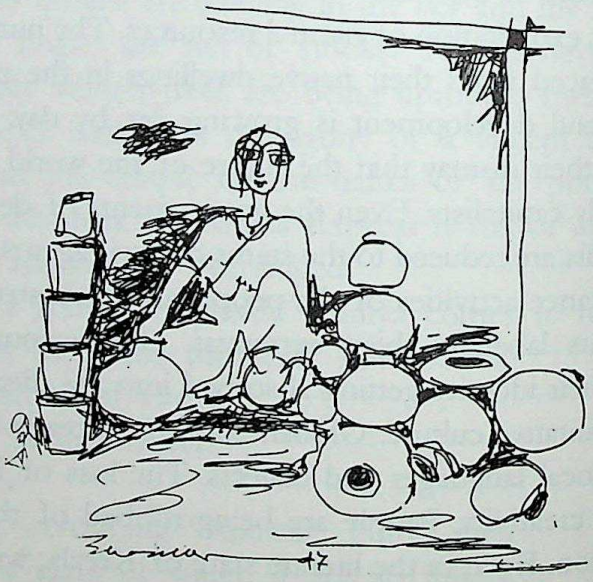

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From the Award-winning Book *Alahayude Penmakkal*

Sara Joseph

Chapter I

The Romas and the Surayis

So it was that the amara grew, the creepers climbing and spreading over sadnesses. Now it's springtime on them. Flowers white and violet. Black flies. Blue beetles. And a green breeze. I'll climb and move up through these beans. There's a fabulous world out there on top. And, spreading out the one thousand and seven folds of my butter-coloured dress, I'll set foot on that amazing world. All on a sudden there'll be a shower of gold and diamonds over Ammama. And, when she grows tired of picking up the diamonds, Ammama will cry out, "Enough, kiddy!"

Annie laughed, putting a hand over her little mouth. Now, moving over to where Ammama stood, bent like a bow, digging the bean-bed, she lifted the pleated tail of her dress.

"What's it, kiddy?"

"Nothing."

"Then go bringa some water."

Giggling, Annie ran to the well. She watered the bean-bed. Her kameez, black with dirt, was soaked, and Annie liked the feel of the cold that crept down her hips.

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When the spade got stuck in the soil, Ammama gave Annie a meaningful glance.

"What's it, kiddy? A pot o' gold?"

Annie squatted near the bean-bed. Her hopes were raised. There could be spectacular worlds under the earth too. The wind blew across the creepers. A few wilted flowers dropped on Annie's hair and on the water on the bean-bed. Ammama pulled out the spade.

"Mussbe some root," she said.

No! Annie was quite sure. It's something else. Something that'll change her life in the whiff of a moment. After that Annie will never be the same.

What came out of the earth was a piece of bone. A chunky bone of a human hand! Ammama spat vehemently and crossed herself. This soil is like that. Wherever you dig, a bone or a skull will crop up. In the light that slipped in through the amara leaves the pale bone glistened with Ammama's spittle.

"Cross yerself, kiddy!"

Ammama gave her a knock on the head. Annie crossed herself.

"Spit!" Ammama said under her breath.

There was no spittle in Annie's mouth. But she forced out a little spit to placate Ammama.

"Why spit?"

Annie was about to touch the bone when Ammama struck her hands off.

"Keepa quiet till I finish saying Alaha's prayer."

Her eyes shut, Ammama started mumbling. Alaha's prayer is meant to cast off the devil. It's quite a sight to see Ammama chanting the prayer, her body atremble and her eyeballs rolling up. It's another language.

Annie's mother Kochurothu says there's no such prayer. Only the reverend church fathers have the power and authority to cast off the devil.

"It's the trick of that evil hag! Or else let 'er say from where she learnt it," Kochurothu challenged her. "Let 'er give its meaning in Malayalam!"

One shouldn't give its meaning. It's a profound secret. Ammama doesn't have the right to unravel its secret. Once it's let out, its effect is gone for ever. Annie has great trust in whatever Ammama

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says. But nobody else in that house believes in it.

Who made Alaha's prayer? Amma swears there's no such prayer in the church. The reverend fathers do not recite Alaha's prayer. So where did it come from? It's not found in any book of prayer. Ammama is the only person around who knows Alaha's prayer. It was whispered in Ammama's ears when her mother was on her deathbed. And when Ammama is on *her* deathbed she'll whisper it in somebody else's ears. Annie wishes that she'll be the chosen one. Ammama's mother had driven away the pests by reciting Alaha's prayer. It's Annie's greatest wish that if she's able to learn Alaha's prayer, she too will drive away the pests. Standing in the middle of the field brimming with paddy spikes, she'll chant Alaha's prayer, and all the pests will flee. They'll flee in utter terror in the direction that she points to, and will never again dare to return to that field. But Amma says casting out pests and devils is ungodly!

"Don't work for two gods!"

Annie doesn't know what it means. She's thought about it a lot, but she's not been able to grasp its meaning. If she asks Amma about it she'll be angry, and Annie doesn't feel like asking Ammama. What if Ammama feels that Annie doesn't believe her? Annie tried asking Chiyyamma, the most beautiful woman in the world. Chiyyamma almost bit her head off!

"Get lost! I've better business than trying to find the meaning of what your Amma says!"

That day she decided not to ask anyone the meaning of the two gods. After all, these two gods can't escape Annie for ever, can they? This is the problem with Amma. She talks about things in such a way it's difficult to get the meaning straight.

Annie loves to see Ammama reciting Alaha's prayer. Ammama's pierced ears will dangle to her shoulders and the big ear-rings—*mekkamothiram*—will jump up and down. The pleated tail of her dress will unfold like the golden burst of the coconut palms' inflorescence. The sunlight passing through the transparent lobes of her ears will give them a touch of crimson. And Ammama will turn into a beauty.

Sometimes the women in the neighbourhood come running to Ammama carrying their howling children.

"Mariam-chettathiye, please stop the cries of this devil!"

Then there's a sudden change of expression and Ammama

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assumes a new face. And Annie wonders: "Who on earth's this?" Ammama places the crying child on her lap and gently strokes its head. She asks Annie to fetch the bottle of annada water kept on the window sill. Annie brings the bottle, holding it by the hemp string tied to its neck. The annada water is what Ammama brings from the church. On some days the bottle will be empty. But Annie is not supposed to reveal the truth before those women. Instead, she has to fill the bottle with plain water. What troubles Annie in such moments are those glowing glances that emerge from the darkness and get hold of her. Kuttipappan's eyes. Even though he is bedridden, Kuttipappan will know that Annie is filling the bottle with plain water. Anger and protest will catch hold of him as stormy coughs. It's unbearable. Annie will feel sad. So when she approaches Kuttipappan's room, she turns her face away, hides the bottle of plain water and runs off. Panting, she hands it to Ammama. And Ammama says glory to it. Thus, Ammama says, it turns into annada water. Annie has tried hard to find out how the plain water changes. But the bottle is so dirty nothing will be clear.

All the while, Kochurotha, Ammama's daughter-in-law, stands leaning against the doorframe, with her finger on her nose, and ready to explode.

"This hag has the right to do this? What the hell's she up to?" The daughter-in-law asks, but her mother-in-law will not give any reply. Kochurotha's anger rises all the more.

One shouldn't mess with the powers of the reverend fathers. One shouldn't put God to test. It's because such ungodly things take place in this house that one of the sons ran off and another got bedridden. And those who're married off—are they doing well? No wonder the other two of marriageable age are stuck here with no way out!

The son who's run off happens to be Annie's father, and the other one is Kuttipappan. Those who're married off are Cherichi-ammayi and Nonu-ammayi, and those who're stuck there are Chinnamma and Chiyyamma, the most beautiful women in the world. Maybe Amma forgot to mention Valiyammayi. If Amma talks about Valiyammayi, Annie knows what she'll say about her—the eldest one who's back home after the death of her mapla.

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Amma keeps talking and her voice rises to a terrible pitch. And Kuttipappan gets disturbed.

"See what when the church says no to you, can't even bury the dead—you die and geta dumped in the sinners' ditch!"

With this Kuttipappan starts twisting and turning on his cot. And the chest pain comes back.

"Chettathiyare!"

A voice too frail arises from Kuttipappan's room. It's a plea to Amma. A terrible, unending cough follows. Only then does Amma stop talking.

"Alright, I won't say things. I don't want your devil or your angel. I clean up all the shit and piss, still you all gang up finally and become one. And me the outsider, always."

Then Amma goes over to the caged Christu, kneels down and starts praying with her hands outstretched. Amma says she's doing the expiation for the family.

It's said Ammama would be totally unaware of all this. She doesn't hear or see anything. Ammama concentrates only on the child on her lap and on Alaha's prayer. The prayer goes on till Amma clams up. At last Ammama opens her eyes suddenly and says, "It's Varothanan!"

Varothanan is an evil spirit. Whenever Ammama gets angry with Annie, she calls her "Varothanan's Horse." This region is like that. A horde of evil spirits and their horses hang around here.

As soon as Alaha's prayer begins Varothanan and his Horse would flee to Hell. And through the bottom of her closed eyes Ammama would see them running. The child stops crying and goes off to sleep.

"Ouseph our holy saint!," exclaims the child's mother. And as she takes the child back from Ammama's hands there's a shower of praise: "Don't I know? These tricks of Varothanan won't pay off with Mariam-chettathi!" Annie is proud to see and hear such things. She leans against Ammama holding the bottle of annada water. How does Ammama manage to do such things? Shoving off this terrible Varothanan to Hell, and calming down this little devil of a child.

"'S nota my power," Ammama would say, crossing herself.

"That's right. 'S the power of Avanengadan Chathan!" That's

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Amma, again. Just take it that everything gets spoiled with this. Amma and Ammama would begin their fight for the day.

Who is this Avanengadan? Most of the terrible battles in the house were fought over him. Amma would say, "My people are believers. Great taravadis. You know that? We, we belong to the great Sixty-four Family. We're not Avanengadan's people like you."

Except that this is a battle between believers and Avanengadan's people, Annie still doesn't know who Avanengadan is. And she doesn't know the meaning of half the words Amma and Ammama use when they fight. Looking at the other listeners putting their fingers on their noses or shutting their ears, or watching Kuttipappan flinging the pillow aside, Annie would guess that they're using foul language. That's all. Some of the listeners would take mother's side and some others Ammama's.

"Looka here, woman, why's this Kochurothu picking a quarrel with Mariam-chettathi?"

"Who knows! She's mad."

Picking a quarrel, yes. But is it caused by madness? Going mad isn't good even if it happens to Amma or Ammama. Annie doesn't like to think of being afraid of her mother when she goes mad.

"All 'cause Mariam-chettathi turned Surayi. Kochurothu didn't create any trouble till then, did she? She just didn't like it. That's the reason."

"So what? Romas and Surayis aren't her family matters, are they?"

"Romas and Surayis don't go together. And go together they won't."

What troubles Annie is these last words. If the Romas and the Surayis do not get along with each other, it means that the fight between Amma and Ammama will continue forever. Romas and Surayis are two churches. Annie finds it difficult to believe that two churches can't get along with each other. Like Amma and Ammama are there two Lords called a Roma Lord and a Surayi Lord? And are they always at each other's throats? It's said this fight didn't begin yesterday or the day before; it's been like this from the days of the Hunch-backed Cross.

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"That hag and her Hunch-backed Cross!," Amma would say. "Kiddy, ask 'er if it's possible to naila down the Lord if the cross is hunch-backed."

Annie would keep quiet. Why create unnecessary fights?

Amma, Annie, Chinnamma and Chiyyamma go to the church of the Romas. Only Ammama goes to the Surayi church. The Romas keep a rosary while the Surayis don't. Ammama thinks little of the rosary, but Amma can't live even for a moment without it. At times Ammama would sing aloud for Amma to hear:

konthayitta mutthappan
kurisinu poyappo
kondadee maatthiree
chakkarappam!

(Our Grand-dad with a rosary went off to the Cross and brought back chakkarappam!)

Amma would grow wild with rage: "That's your family trait!"

And Ammama would have a hearty laugh. She used to tease Annie too, calling her a Roma. "What's this on yer neck, kiddy? A fish-head?" Ammama would tease her for wearing a vendinga around her neck. The Romas go around with a vendinga, the Surayis don't. If Annie didn't wear her vendinga, Amma would pinch her thighs gold. In the catechism class the kochachen—the vicar—would scold her and make her stand on her knees. The kochachen would pull out a vendinga from his pocket and put it then and there around her neck.

Valiyammayi doesn't go to church. The man who married her was a Yakobaya. He died on the seventh day after the marriage. With that Valiyammayi lost her faith in the Roma church and the Yakobaya church. "I was cheated" is what Valiyammayi says about churches.

Ammama says that Kuttipappen, when he was healthy, used to spend all his time in the church. Kuttipappen and the kochachen in the church had studied and grown up together. Kuttipappen too wanted to become a priest. But he couldn't continue his studies as he was always ill. Kuttipappen used to play the harmonium for the holy mass. He had a harmonium and a bul-bul. Kuttipappen had

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tried to teach Annie the Hindi song *'Bachpan ki muhabbath ko'* on the bul-bul. She learned only till *'bachpan ki'*. By then his health deteriorated and Kuttipappen became bed-ridden.

They say Annie's Appan doesn't have a God.

Whenever Amma says "I can't standa people who don't believe in God" she's really talking about Annie's Appan. Annie hasn't seen her Appan. Well, she must've seen him, but she doesn't remember him. Nobody remembers what they see when they're nineteen days old. That her Appan doesn't have a God makes Annie sad. Amma had taught Annie some prayers to change her Appan's mind. She takes Annie out on Saturdays for the novena prayers at the church of Our Mother of Perpetual Help to get it done. Get it done means that Appan should change his mind and believe in God. Ammama says it's unnecessary. "What God? My Kochappan is a good human being." Amma would laugh scornfully, "What a wonderful human being! When umma is bedridden after the delivery, the mapla runs off. After that nothing's heard of him. Such a wonderful Kochappan!" It has been eight years now. Where would Annie's Appan be now? Some people say he's gone to Assam. It's difficult for those who have gone to Assam to return. They might die of malaria or they might starve to death. Even if she has never seen him, her Appan is there in Annie's heart, complete with all the details. As she was not willing to accept that her Appan could simply die of malaria, Annie had faith in Kuttipappan's words: "Chettan must have joined the army. He is enthusiastic about the war and his love for the country is really great."

Amma doesn't believe those words. "What's wrong with you, child? Your Appan must've married somebody else and must be living comfortably elsewhere, making others suffer....Let him live comfortably. Me? I'm from a good family. I won't do anything that's against the laws of the holy congregation. Maybe there's a lot of things in my family. But will they be different if my daughter and I wish otherwise? I'll stay here in my mapla's house and sustain myself on this *kanji* and *chutney* to the last day of my life. Everything said and done, I'll at least get the heavenly reward for cleaning up the shit and piss of this disabled one."

Ammama joined the Surayi church for the sake of Cherich

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Ammai's marriage. She abandoned her faith to realize her plans. She spoke against the Pope, which a good catholic should never do. Amma couldn't stand it. Seeds of bitterness were sowed in Amma's heart.

Translated from Malayalam by V.C. Harris

Translator's Note: This is part of a work in progress, and hence provisional. The specificities of the local dialect that the novel brilliantly exploits—an aspect that has been widely commented on in critical responses—impel me to take certain liberties with the English language, especially in trying to stretch verb forms with an additional 'a', like in 'go bringa some water', 'keepa quiet', etc.

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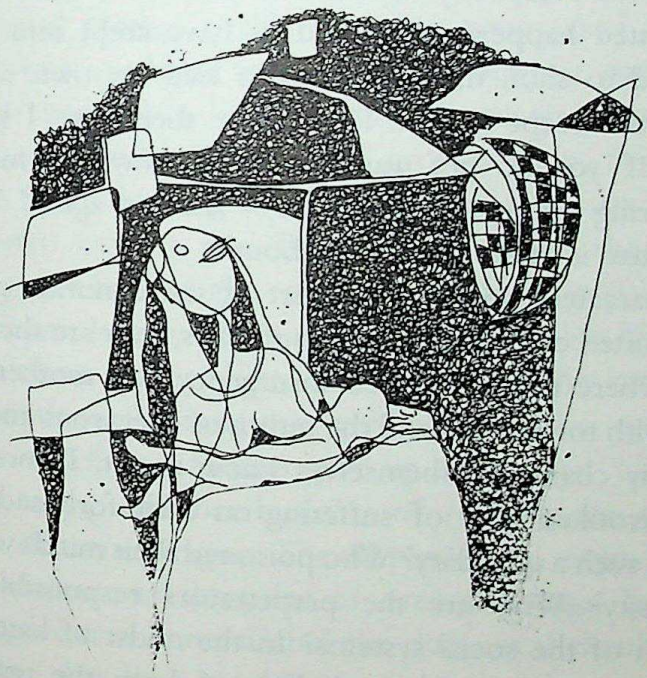

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Authorspeak: Sudhir Naoroibam

Literature was a sort of escape for me, an escape to find myself some sort of amusement in the beginning. But my friends and colleagues started urging— 'Take us also in your world of amusement.' They gave me strength. I paid more attention to human love, the innocence and purity that is found in it, then the prideless beauty of the hills, rivers and lakes—social reality could not attract me much in those days. It is my wish to delve into the extreme depth of mankind's beauty and to get intoxicated and to bring out what was found there for everybody to see. But what do I write! How come those unwanted happenings around us have crept into my stories. I try so hard to shun them out and to lead my own way; but no, my characters accept it not. They force their way. I pray for an agreement. If you do not want to go my way you must at least accept to bring about an agreement— 'Let us agree.' Then I ask myself—'What is there to agree about?'

My characters possess the heart of the common people, they are the exploited class, they are the sufferers, they are the inhabitants of a land where there is armed insurgency. My mothers are those who await with torches in hand the return of their sons and daughters. Although my characters themselves know it not, I know who has drawn the crooked lines of suffering on their foreheads. Who put their lives in such a quandary? Who poisoned their minds with mistrust and animosity? Who are the perpetrators responsible for such exacerbation of the social systems? In the midst of hateful political hagglings, in the midst of the bullets of both the revolutionaries and the armed forces, these characters of mine go on making plans for their present life bearing with them the indelible ugly lines drawn by others on their forehead. I have no idea about their 'tomorrow

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From the Award-winning Book: *Leiyi Khara Punshi Khara*

Sudhir Naoroibam

An Amazing Smile

It was very early in the morning when Mother and I went around the families who had bought rice on credit to ask them to pay up. Only some, Mother could remember, were asked for payment. The names had not been kept in record. Many a name had been forgotten. It was not a befitting way of asking to pay up.

Long ago Mother ran a small grocery shop. Sale was good. After some time, thinking that it would be good to the business Mother started keeping rice. But, lo and behold, she lost heavily. Almost everyone had bought on credit. It was not possible to refuse them. Harsh words were of no use. They swarmed in like honeybees swarming around the bee-hive. So to say even the lame and blind persons were there. Realising that without closing her eyes she would not be able to sell rice, Mother gave up selling rice. With the debts incurred in selling rice, her business of running the grocery shop was not all that encouraging. She disposed off seven bags of rice but could not recover the price of even five bags. It was such a long time ago but no one cleared the dues on their own. We were equally aware that they would not pay up.

Compelling hardship had made us ask them to clear their dues —thinking we might get at least something. But it was useless. When they were asked to pay up some of them had not even got up.

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Some even got angry and retorted—when was it that I took rice from you. Some seemed to be really ashamed and swore in the name of thirty-three crore gods and goddesses that they would pay the very next day. A lot many of them had laughed at us. On an average, most of the families owed us fifty to hundred rupees. There were some who owed us only ten rupees.

Since we had to go from house to house, it was really tiring. And since it was rainy season, the roads were not in a very good condition—mud everywhere. Some of the roads were flooded and we could not go. We came across many families devoid of even the bare necessities. We had come away from many families without asking them to pay up. It was like making a survey of destitute families instead of going around to ask for clearing the dues.

When we started to feel the heat of the sun we came to a family—passing through a road full of mud reaching up to our knees. We were really amazed to see the condition of the house. We have come across many a house in very bad shape but none could stand in comparison with this one. The house was leaning towards the back as far as it could go. The door was open a bit. It would not be able to open wider because of its condition. The courtyard was flooded with water reaching up to our ankles. Some boulders, not very big, were placed with long gaps in between. I wished to know the length of the steps of the persons using it. Without any word Mother and I turned our faces to return. When we had taken one or two steps, a woman called us from behind,"Isn't it *Enamma*[1]?"

When I turned around, I saw *Ene*-Kundalei[2] standing dazzled with a smile on her lips.

I said, "Is this your house, *Ene*?"

"Yes, why did you turn back silently?"

"Oh, it's simply this—since we didn't see anyone around, we thought that no one must be in." Mother made it up immediately.

"We are there. You didn't call." *Ene* sincerely responded.

She then said, "Come in *Enamma*. Come *Ebungo*[3], climb up (on the veranda), *Ebemma*[4] bring a mat."

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1. Enamma: Sister-in-law
2. Ene-Kundalei: Aunt-Kundalei; Ene (aunt) is used as a suffix to the name Kundalei.
3. Ebungo: Young boy; often used to address a younger male, lovingly.

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Mother and I went in without saying anything to each other. Someone, about my age brought a mat and placed it on the floor. After a quick glance at us, she immediately entered the house and closed the door.

"It's really embarrassing," *Ene* said, "the condition of this house. It would have been better to let you leave without calling you in."

It's God's play to make one feel embarrassed at the difference in the living conditions of families. *Ene's* daughter was more abashed than her. What was the use of her feeling sheepish? God's strategy is not only beautiful but also very cruel.

Mother and I entered and sat on the torn, disfigured mat. We sighed deeply.

"Where were you going?" *Ene* asked.

"We came for a visit," mother replied "Where's Amuba?"

"He has gone to the lake. He'll be back any moment now. He goes to the lake for fishing. We buy our food after selling the fish. We starve when there is no catch."

She turned towards the house and said, "*Ebemma*, prepare tea." She then said, "Let's have tea. It won't be tasty—it'll be without milk. I simply wanted that we should have tea together."

With or without milk, it was welcome to me. We had visited so many families since early morning but no one had offered tea. There was no one so thoughtful like *Ene*-Kundalei. All of them were so ignorant.

"*Ema*[5], please come in." It was her daughter. But she could not be seen.

Ene asked, "What happened?"

"I say please come in."

Ene got up and went in. Inside, they talked in hushed tones. She hurriedly came out and said, "*Enamma*, please wait for a while. Let me go to the grocery shop."

"Why? What happened?" Mother asked.

"It'll be for a short while, I'll be back in no time. I've to buy tea-leaves."

"It's alright if you don't have tea-leaves we'll have tea on another occasion."

4. Ebemma : Young girl; often used to address to a younger female, lovingly.
5. Ema: Mother

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I too joined, "*Ene*, we'll have it later."

Ene seemed not to be content.

Mother said, "Leave aside your tea. What's this! We are afraid even to sit here. Look for some bamboo poles and replace the pillars. It's about to fall down."

"*Enamma*, what to say, it may be said that we are waiting for it to fall down! We do not have bamboo groves to enable us to replace the pillars—from where we'll get the money? Even the roof is in a very bad shape. To pass just this rainy season we have plugged the holes by scattering straw here and there. There is nothing good to be seen whichever direction we look . Recently, when the youngest child was born I nearly died. I recovered and got up from bed only a few days back. When I went to see the doctor, he scolded me and told me not to go to him again. It was not for any other reason but only this: that I was not eating well. Our poverty was made public in front of everyone. There is nothing to show and be proud of. He was also bitten by a snake and narrowly escaped death."

"Oh, how did it happen?" I said, "What kind of snake bit him?"

"It was said to be a cobra. It was when he went to collect *kambong*[6] for the recent *Cheiraoba*.[7] He met with such a calamity, in his struggle to earn a meagre income. We consulted a *Maiba*[8] first to keep the treatment the least expensive. But the *Meitie-Maiba*[9] turned out to be more dangerous. In extracting the snake's poison, we have been stripped of everything we own. The treatment took very long. My becoming weak compounded the matter, the paddy field from which we used to get five to ten bags of rice annually was disposed off. I don't know what to do; we are waiting for death. I know we owe you the price of seven kilograms of rice. I haven't forgotten it. I keep thinking of paying the amount. But we are unable to do so. We have become totally blind to your kindness towards us."

"Yes, yes," mother said, "that is all right. You try to repair

6. kambong: a kind of wild reed found growing in lakes, floating on the water surface, with edible bulbous stem.
7. Cheiraoba: Manipuri New Year day
8. Maiba: Shaman
9. Meitie-Maiba: Manipuri-Shaman

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your house before it falls down. We have some bamboo poles that were used for constructing the RCC roof of our house. Come someday and take whatever you require. Can you leave it like this saying that there is no money!"

"*Eche*[10], have you come for a visit?" *Mama*[11] Amuba said. We did not notice him coming. Dark complexioned—he was limping, holding a bundle of fishhooks in one hand and a packet in the other, his left hand.

"How many have you caught?" Mother asked.

"Caught some, *Eche*." Saying this he dropped the packet on the veranda. He said to *Ene*, "The way you put worms on hooks! only two *Meitei Ngamus*[12] were hooked. You have even forgotten how to put worms on hooks."

Ene said with a smile, "Ah, as if I started doing it only a few days back. It is because it's not the season for using hooks."

She opened the packet *Mama* had brought, to see what was inside. A big *Ayok-nga*[13], still alive, opening and closing its mouth. Some small fishes, *Ngakha*[14] and *Ngamhai*[15] were also there. *Ene* was happy. We, also watching the scene, said, "Ah, ah!"

Mother said, "Is the *Ayok-nga* caught in the net?"

"Yes, *Eche*, if one more like it can be caught then we will be able to get back the net's cost. *Eche* have you smoked bidi?" Saying this he took out bidi from the fold of his garments and gave one to Mother.

Mother said with a smile, "I also have some. Let's smoke mine."

"No, we have to smoke mine." He took out a matchbox and struck a matchstick "*Eche*, mine is wet."

Mother said, "It won't do. This bidi is also wet. You, who have come out of water, are trying to show off. I say, take this, let's smoke mine. I have a match box also."

They lighted bidi and smoked together.

"You were nearly killed because of a snakebite?" Mother said.

---

10. Eche: Elder sister
11. Mama: Maternal Uncle
12. Meitei Ngamus: A variety of Lata fish (Chansna murulius)
13. Ayok-nga: Any variety of large fish introduced in Manipur for pisciculture.
14. Ngakha: A kind of small fish, Puntius ticto
15. Ngamhai: A kind of small fish, Chanda ranga

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"Yes. See this, my leg has become crooked. See how big is the scar. The present-day *Maibas* are so inexperienced."

"Experienced or inexperienced, you are lucky to have survived. Listen Amuba, you repair your house before it falls down. I've told Kundalei also. We have some bamboo poles, come someday to take it."

"It's a matter of great shame, being a man I'm not even able to repair my own house. *Eche*, I am such a coward! I have been thinking of clearing your debt. But I'm unable to do so."

After talking on various topics, when we were about to get up to leave, *Ene* stopped us and called *Mama* inside. They talked in hushed tones. Their nature reminded us of the incident of tea without milk. Who might know, Mama would again say that he would buy tea-leaves and we would have to take tea together. But, it was not that. They wanted us to take the *Ayo-knga, Mama* had caught.

Mother said refusing it, "No, don't let us do it. We won't take it. Why, such a big fish—we cannot."

Mama insisted, "Why *Eche*, you have done a lot more for us. We are very much indebted to you. We won't be able to repay it in this life time. You have come here, once in a blue moon. I have offered what we can. Please take it; otherwise we would be very disheartened."

"You may be disheartened—think nothing of it, Amuba." Mother said, "If you want us to buy it we will buy it. Otherwise we can't."

"We didn't ask you to buy it, *Enamma*" *Ene* said angrily, "we are so poor that we have become ungrateful persons. We aren't trying to return you our debt. We have just given it out of love. Please take it."

Mother could not argue any further. She looked at me with questioning eyes. I too looked at her in the same manner.

Mama immediately put a *peiya*[16] in the mouth and passed it through the gills of the fish making a loop for carrying it. He then forcibly handed it over to me.

"Alright, alright" Mother said. "If you insist, we'll have to take it."

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16. Peiya: thin bamboo spilt used for tying or binding things

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Mother and I came out. *Mama* and *Ene* came up to the gate to see us off.

On the way, I said to mothe. "This fish is quite heavy."

"It's that." Mother replied immediately. She was also thinking about the fish. She said, "They refused to take money, what they are doing is...."

I shot back, "Let me return it."

"How will you return the fish?"

"One of our relatives have expired, we had forgotten about it, we cannot eat fish—I'll simply bluff like this."

Mother smiled, "All right, return it."

I retraced my steps. *Mama* and *Ene* were smiling and sitting on the veranda. Their daughter was also sitting with them. Their faces were radiant with happiness. I was at a loss with what topic their minds were bonded as one. But their cheerful smile made me halt.

I came out silently. I did not return the fish. I was hesitant; why should their cheerful smile be spoiled only because of me.

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

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Authorspeak: T.V. Sirdeshmukh

I have given importance to two things in my life. Firstly, we should know who we are. To whom are we connected? What makes our soul happy and what makes it unhappy? Secondly, with this knowledge we should be in harmony with the whole created world and communicate with it; we should be able to enjoy this sense of oneness.

I believe that literature is also the source from which experiences of life can be gained. Our lives are restless because of difficulties that come in the way of achieving our expectations.

There is a constant struggle between expectations and fulfilment. If one wants to make something new out of it, he has to make some special efforts for it and its results should be linked to human welfare. If it is not so, the beauty of creation disintegrates at every step and its results are harmful to humanity. Litterateurs should not forget that their dharma lies in their urge for literary creation and that their life's principle reflects in their works. I have always taken care that the form and content of my work should be compatible to these ideas.

In our social life there are enough of struggles and clashes. There are many instances of inequality and injustice. Dishonesty, violence and destruction are at their height. The literature that touches consciousness gets at the compelling ugliness of truth. But there is something that speaks against it under the influence of the effective essence of truth as well. Affection and intimacy, love and tenderness break down alienation, enmity and hostility. Great literature has always proved this fact.

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From the Award-winning Book *Dangora: Eka Nagaricha*

T.V. Sirdeshmukh

That afternoon, commander Rathod took care of various chores. He personally supervised the locking up of the private and public treasuries and the warehouse. Then he headed straight towards Barrister Chandrachud's house. The Barrister was suffering from a remittant fever for the past fortnight. He had just started moving around in the house.

When Chandrachud heard of the manner in which King Raghuveer Singh had put an end to his life, his legs seemed to give way. He held his head and sat down abruptly.

"Here I am struck to my bed and this awful thing has happened. How could the king deceive me, his poor friend, in this manner? He'd never been so pitiless, so impulsive, ever before."

Rathod tried to pacify him. "Take it from someone who's a few years older than you, Saheb. Don't feel bad. This is life. The moment a man realizes that the Almighty has summoned him, he abandons all feelings for others. He just wants to free himself of all fetters...."

"Perhaps what you're saying is correct. One can't stop anyone from going his way. But the fact remains that I'm an unfortunate man. I enjoyed immense joy and wealth because of the king...but I was unable to rescue him from this emotional calamity that killed him. I can barely walk now. I can't even stand for a long time. Take me there in a carriage or a palanquin. I must see the king one last time."

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Commander Rathod promptly fulfilled the Barister's wish.

When Chandrachud met the queen, he realized that, the king had written some notes in his desk diary. Also, his will written before his final departure was different from the earlier one.

Barrister Chandrachud was the king's legal adviser. Just four or five years older than the king. A skilled opponent on the tennis court. A drinking companion. A friend who shared joys and sorrows. There was only one thing about Chandrachud that did not appeal to the king—his complacent laziness and the ensuing delay in official matters. But these differences of opinion ended on the tennis court or over a drink.

Madhavrao Desai would tackle and complete all the jobs left undone by Chandrachud. The king admired their mutual alliance.

Chandrachud was thoroughly aware of the importance of the two written accounts penned by the king. He knew that he had to do whatever he could to prevent the act of his friend's suicide getting caught in the noose of suspicion or legal snares.

Once it was revealed that the king hadn't died a natural death, the British rulers were bound to conduct a post-mortem probe to analyse the foul and fair in the matter. One had to emerge from that unscathed. Chandrachud concentrated his thought on how to do just that.

* * *

The whole day went by and night fell. Nobody arrived from Kolhapur. Neither was there any message.

The king's body lay in the Chandramahal. All of Saikhed was in a dull stupor. Half-awake, it waited for news of orders from the British government.

The Resident's representative arrived in Saikhed at about eleven the next morning.

This was an era when even a white sergeant could easily demonstrate the pressures of imperialist domination. And Richard Munro was much more than a mere sergeant. He was a senior official from the office of the Governor of Bombay, here on a special mission. Secretary to the Department of Indian States.

As soon as he reached Saikhed, he met the queen and offered

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his condolences. Then he tried to find out the minute details of the incident. Not only did he speak to Prime Minister Khasnis, Justice Bakhle and Commander Rathod, he also made shrewd inquiries of Sakharam, the chief palace guard and the bodyguard Baliram who was the king's only attendant in his final days. Munro could speak a smattering of Marathi.

When he asked for the diagnosis of the King's illness and his medical papers and prescriptions, Doctor Thorat had to resort to humble entreaty. He literally fell at Munro's feet. Thorat thought he had done the right thing and nobody had seen him behave thus, but Bali, standing at the door of the palace room, took in everything with his sharp gaze.

Thorat told a sob story of how he was aware that the king never took his own medicine, that an old Ayurvedic practitioner from the town would come to meet him, but even this gentleman hadn't seen the king during the last four days. Munro lent him a patient ear. Reassured, Thorat said, "Rajasaheb was very obstinate. He had a bad temper. He used to fret inwardly. He didn't let anyone know..."

Munro was furious. But he remained overtly calm and said: "I know. I have heard a few stories of his capricious behaviour. But so what? One must be able to speak well of those who have left us forever. My dear Doctor, the true mettle of officials like you is tested in just such difficult conditions. At the very least I would say that you have neglected your duty...."

When Thorat said, "Sir, this is an unnecessary outrage on me...." Munro replied fairly quietly but with sarcasm in his tone.

"Alright. Let's say you acted like a slovenly clerk. You did not use your knowledge and your authority and you have the gall to tell me that this is an outrage! Who is the officer in this state who can question you? The Prime Minister. I have already spoken to him. You are both alike....The ruler of the state locks himself up for four days... refuses to eat and then cuts his wrist in this solitary state and dies...And you just look on calmly. Even if I don't say it your conscience is bound to label you an irresponsible, incompetent officer. Understand?"

When Prime Minister Khasnis also spoke in the same vague, loose style as Thorat, Munro ordered, "Really? Then let's do a post-

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mortem. We have to get to the bottom of this and find out if it's a suicide or murder..."

* * *

Everyone's hearts were in their mouths.

Chandrachud heard the news that the white officer from Kolhapur was furious after his meetings with the Prime Minister and Doctor Thorat and was insisting on a post-mortem report. Desai and Rathod heard it too. They didn't know what to do. They came to Chandrachud to consult him.

When Commander Rathod mentioned that the officer from Kolhapur was a certain Munro, Chandrachud suddenly thought: "Could it be the same Munro?"

In a tough situation, one tends to cling to the slightest ray of hope. Chandrachud remembered that when he was studying at the Old Bailey in England, he had a classmate called Richard Munro. He was the kind of person one couldn't forget easily because he had a genuine curiosity about India and was a student of the history of the Marathas. They became more friendly at the swimming pool. He was slightly chubby, he wore glasses, but the chap stayed ahead of Chandrachud in the water. He preferred to spend more time in the swimming pool. He would beat Chandrachud in a race. When Chandrachud hit back by beating him at tennis, he appreciated it as much as Chandrachud did. He would laugh and say, "You're a true Maratha. You can win on land. Come into the water and I'll show you my skills! I'm a born islander...I don't know your guerilla tactics...."

He had another unique facet. He never touched liquor. He did not keep Chandrachud company even once. It seems his father had worked in some brewery. He fell from a great height into a huge barrel of alcohol and was drowned.

Could it be the same Munro? But people like him, however nice, are tough and loners. You can't really rely on them.

Whoever he may be, one had to go and see him. The sun was going down but it was still very warm. The day was about to end. The second day. The obstacle of the king's last rites had still not been dealt with. The Resident's representative was housed in

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the small bungalow in the palace grounds built for Miss Mclaine. What if he created a hitch? This was the thought in Chandrachud's head as he arrived outside Munro's drawing room in a slightly depressed mood.

He sent in a note with the attendant.

In a few seconds, Munro emerged from the room where he was resting, wiping the lenses of his spectacles.

As soon as he stepped into the living room, he called out a familiar greeting, "Chandrachuda! My good old friend! How are you?"

"You could say I'm fine. How are you? Do you remember me?"

"Of course? You haven't changed at all. You're as slim as ever. Look at me. See how round I've become! My wife keeps teasing me about my pot belly... and my bald pate."

"Let her. She's being honest. But you know, women prefer their husbands like that. A man who has gorged on their cooking and become nice and plump. And as for the baldness, over here we consider that a sign of good fortune."

"Really. Mr. Chandrachuda, I would have loved to sit down and chat some more, but circumstances are very strange. But first tell me, how come you're here, at this hour? Can we fix another time to meet? I'm sorry, I can't spend any more time with you."

"Mr. Munro, I don't have any time either. I'm a servant of this State, the late Rajasaheb's legal adviser. But he also considered me a close friend. By virtue of these two roles, I owe it to him to carry out this one last duty for him. I would appreciate your help."

"My friend, I share your sorrow. Long live the king! Give me your advice, and make my task easier. I was caught in quite a dilemma...."

"What other advice could I give? I would like your consent to complete Rajasaheb's last rites as soon as possible."

"Fine. But tell me, is there any cause for suspicion?"

"None at all. Before his death, Rajasaheb has put down everything in his own handwriting. I have brought those papers for your perusal."

"That's great. I had heard about them."

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"How? Who told you?"

"Mr. Desai, the king's Secretary, was here to see me... some time ago."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say much. But he handed me some typed papers, the last few pages from the king's diary and his will translated in English.

"Really? I had asked him to do so but I thought I should meet you before he carried out that task. I have here the original papers written by the king. Take a look at them."

Munro went through the papers casually. He handed them back to Chandrachud and said, "My dear Counsellor to the departed Rajasaheb, you know well that this is a serious, delicate matter. I have superiors to whom I am answerable. I must be able to present a strong case...so do as I say. The job of checking that the original is indeed in the King's hand, and that the translation is authentic and then attesting the papers rests with you. I leave that responsibility to you. Please do it with due care. Give it to me in writing that everything is in order. Get the State's Prime Minister to sign as a witness. Attach the formal certificate from the Chief Medical Officer of the state along with your explanation. That's all."

Munro took out a long envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket. He partly pulled out the typed papers of the translation and held them out to Chandrachud.

"Take these back. I've read them."

Chandrachud could still feel the weakness brought on by his illness. He gathered together the typed papers, the king's desk diary and the blue envelope. Rising from his chair, he said, "I'll come back after a while...."

Chandrachud sat down immediately and said, "My dear friend, I'll just rest a bit. I need some water."

Anant Seshadri of the Bombay Government who was looking after Munro, was standing next to him. He lent his support to Chandrachud and called for some water.

Chandrachud glanced at the papers in his hand and said, "Mr. Munro, it won't take me long to check these. I know how much concern and determination Desai has. He must have done everything

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properly. My only request is that once this is done, without wasting even a second...."

"Yes, of course. I have put the green signal in your hands!"

"What can I say to you? It's impossible for me to read this again. With every word, my mind is overwhelmed by memories of the King...I have no doubts at all about the linguistic knowledge of the secretary who gave you this translation."

"I don't see anything impossible in it. From his manner and the way he spoke, I understood that this was no ordinary person. As he left, he gave me one important piece of news...".

"What news?"

"You too will be surprised when you hear it. The secretary said, "When I left Saikhed on the third to go to Khadki, Rajasaheb handed me a sealed envelope addressed to the Political Agent. He ordered me to post it from Khadki on the fifth of May. I carried out his order. The king had typed the letter and the address on the envelope himself. Of course, the envelope carried the State's seal."

I asked him. 'What could it have contained?' He said, 'How would I know? But when one takes into account the significance of the fifth, I feel, what else could it contain but the same previous message of farewell.' The secretary stood with his head bowed for a moment. As he departed, he told me. 'When I left the capital for Khadki I didn't realize anything at all. Truly. I have a weak intelligence! Saheb, only you can ensure that Rajasaheb's mortal remains will not be disrespected in any way. I am only a small-time employee of this State. What more can I say?'... I found him so sincere, so gentle. I could well understand him. You must have realized that the final message from the king, in the blue envelope, was written on the fifth."

Chandrachud interrupted him.

"You know, Mr. Munro? The task I came to you for has already been half-completed by this secretary-friend."

"I know that. Prepare your answer as you sit here. I'll be back in a minute. Take your own time."

Munro went into the inner room. He came out after a while. Chandrachud placed the affidavit before him. He signed it. He told Munro that he would get the other witnesses to sign rightaway.

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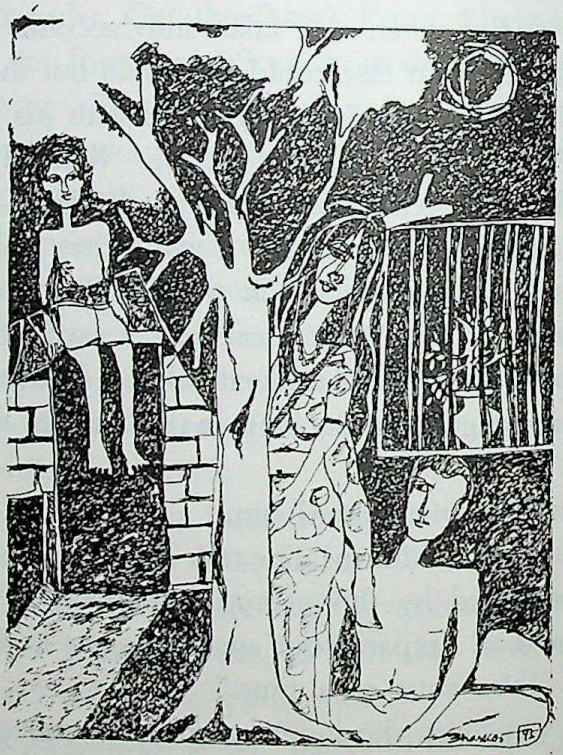
Munro said, "My dear friend, you will excuse me for this formality. I beg your pardon that I had to resort to it. Now get on with the rest of the work. I'll rest awhile. I must leave from here tomorrow morning."

* * *

It was almost evening by the time everything was done. The attendant on duty lit the lamps in all the rooms.

The sky was full of unseasonal clouds. There was a raging wind. The dried leaves and dust made the atmosphere very stuffy. Anant Seshadri held Chandrachud's hand and escorted him to the palace.

Translated from Marathi by Mukta Rajadhyaksha



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Authorspeak: Bindya Subba

My novel *Athah* is not merely fiction but reality of life a, rather very dark side, the opposite side of life, stories of split up minds, broken off minds. The subject is based on abnormal psychology, on the very unfortunate mentally scattered people who seem to have lost the track of life, forgotten their skill and art of living which are needed to fulfill the worth and meaning of a successful human being. We, the normal people, adjust to our various obligations of life, duties, ethics, and relations. But the contradicted characters of *Athah* do not obey life, do not accept or are unable to shoulder any responsibilities and are maladjusted to life.

...If there is any wonderful and inaccessible thing in the world, it is the human mind. Every person is absolutely different from other in his or her mind. The title is *Athah* because the future and destination of the mentally deranged people is unknown and unpredictable. Although I have tried to enlarge the scope of Nepali fiction-writing by exploring a whole new continent of my experience and study, let me say that I am in the nursing service of West Bengal as a sister tutor, teacher in a School of Nursing in Darjeeling. *Athah* is based on my experience during my higher study of Nursing in a metropolitan city. As one of the subjects of the particular course, I was deputed to an Institute of Psychiatry to have practical experience and study for a couple of weeks, and got the opportunity to glance deeply into the destiny of those unfortunate men and women with so many disorders—disorder in thinking, emotions, perceptions and behaviour and in the total personality. Although *Athah* is fiction, it is based on that reality I came to experience....

❑

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From the Award-winning Book *Athah*

Bindya Subba

Pushing my way through the bougainvillia bushes I stepped on to the courtyard of that mansion. Looking around I was about to give a call, when my eyes met with a pair of eyes that were gazing at me from the window right above my head. It was not difficult for me to guess whose eyes they were, drawn to which I had arrived there. I checked the address in the small diary in my hand and confirmed the shining brass name-plate on the huge door—Mr. Subodh Kumar.

My hand rose to press the door-bell, but it stopped as a question rose in my mind—why did I come here? What brought me here? I don't see any purpose which could be a solid base to stand on. I thought of turning back but those big shapely eyes were peering through the side of the window-curtain above. The eyes which I liked so much looked today like those of a terrified deer, and this prompted my hand to press the door-bell. Why did I ring the bell? I asked myself once again. Meanwhile the door opened and there stood a young woman whose appearance suggested that she was a house-maid.

"Whom would you like to see?"

Questioning, she looked at my unfamiliar face.

Whom to name? Preeti? Or, Subodh Babu?

And almost suddenly the words come out—"Is Subodh Babu home?"

"Yes, he is. Be seated, please."

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Pointing to a seat in the drawing room she walked in. My eyes began to observe the room where all the objects seemed to be valuable and antique. Two large framed oil paintings and one considerably big metal figure of a young woman in a corner made the room look elegant. It was said that the mansion housed a joint family, but now it looked otherwise as there was less voice that could be heard. After several minutes, there appeared a man with an imposing personality in white kurta-pyjama and his eyes wore specs in golden frame.

* * *

I came out of the mansion empty-handed, the same way as I'd entered it. Having walked a few paces on my way back I looked for a while. The gate is decked with bougainvillia outside the compound and on the other side, the wall with a creeper that made its way high over the roof; the house, despite its countless untold stories hidden in itself, stood so elegantly. I turned my eyes up to that window, but now there were no eyes to look down at me.

I could not forget Preeti, her youthfulness, her beauty and, above all, her mental derangement. I have come into contact with thousands of sick people; passed months in the mental hospital out here, too, and was sometimes deeply moved by their fate, yet I don't know how I came to be so attached to Preeti. I only wished that she should be able to come back to life's mainstream, her consciousness should bend down to the reality and she should lead a normal life. But in the interaction I had with her in recent days, in my endeavour to study her mind and delve into her heart, she sometimes came up to me as a woman with the whole sense of beauty, sometimes with eyes full of dreams she would approach me for help and sometimes she would be stark naked and falling from feminine grace she would bare all that were supposed to be covered. She has not been able to touch life concordantly. Even if she, at times, happens to come near it, a delusion emerges to get hold of her and she slips off and is thrown out of the stream of life.

I don't know how to string those innumerable moments shared by us—she as a case in this mental asylum and myself a student of a nursing college sent to this hospital for a few days as a part

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of our training. There's only a mountain of burden in me, a terrific sea of feelings, and I can't say how to discern and set them down coherently.

* * *

There are two beds in a room. A woman is lying on one and beside her there is a young woman in her early twenties sitting with her legs bent.

"Good Morning. How many are you here?"

"We are two in this room."

"I'm a student of nursing college. May I know your name?"

"I'm Preeti." The young woman all smiles spoke and so sweet was the smile that I was dazzled. Young boys could die for such a smile.

"And how is our dear Preeti, now?"

"I'm alright. Perhaps I'll be released in a day or two." As her beautiful looks so too were her voice and the way she spoke. Somewhat dark-complexioned, she had, a shapely face, slim figure and a pair of large, intoxicating eyes. Can such a beautiful girl become a lunatic? So pretty, so tender and this insanity.

"Preeti, we shall talk more; I will keep coming back okay?"

She smiled in reply.

Two long benches were set in one corner of the veranda and there sat young woman of about twenty-four. There is no tenderness in the face as that of Preeti. Seeing me approaching her she became stiff and fixed her eyes right ahead.

I wished her good morning and introduced myself and said to her, "May I know your name?"

She did not move.

I repeated the same question, smiling.

This time, she turned her head towards me. She had big dark eyes beneath unkempt curly hair. Curving the corner of her lips she replied, "What do you do with my name?"

"I shall know you by name and we'll talk to each other. If you trust me, I may be of some use to you."

"Alright, I'll tell you my name but I'm not willing to tell you about my personal matters. No one has the right to know it and comment on it."

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"Agreed. As you wish."

"Aparajita." She uttered her name like a declaration.

"Ah! What a sweet name. A name befitting your personality."

Again the same corner of her lips curved but it suggested a different feeling, or so I felt.

* * *

Most of the mentally ill I've encountered so far are nasty, in rags, with sooty face and dishevelled hair, picking up the things in the streets and walking babbling as they go, but I'd never before seen these people so smartly dressed, of so tender age and with such a mesmerizing smile. Are they really insane? My mind finds it difficult to readily believe it. Look at that alluring beauty of Preeti and the self-respect of that Bengali girl, Aparajita.

* * *

"Sister, Aparajita can sing," Preeti says.

"Oh! Jita, let us listen to your song."

She was ready to sing forthwith. Lowering her eye, she sang without harmonium.

> Nobody understands, nobody
> how the heart suffers
> Gold also lies hidden in the heart of darkness
> but all know of it.
> I do not blame you
> I do not want you to burn like me.

Ah! How melodious and pathos-laden a voice it was! The lyric and tune were also beautifully composed.

Having finished singing, she raised her eyes that looked eager to know about the impression the song left on us. I was yet to disembark from the intoxication of the song, but now I must say something.

"Jita, I never knew you have so melodious a voice, such a gift of singing."

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Jita's face was suddenly lit up like the moon from behind the thin cloud. It seemed that her egoistic mind, quite unmoved by other things, expanded a little with the words of appreciation.

"Let us all clap our hands to congratulate Aparajita for such a beautiful song."

The moon kept shining from behind the curtain.

"Now I sing a song, too." It was Preeti accompanied by Aparajita in the line. She bent both her legs on the chair and leant on to the wall (her own flamboyance) and before the song she first delivered a dialogue from a Hindi film that said, "Friend, today is the last day of our college life, everybody must have thought something about life, and I too have thought"—then posing her hands as those of a guitar player she sang with her eyes closed:

> Papa says my name will soar high
> I will accomplish something great in the world
> But no one knows
> where I am destined to.
> Papa says...

Her voice was not that melodious, yet she sang the correct lyric and in the right scale. She opened her eyes, smiling. We applauded her with clap. The 'moon' came out straight forward and was flattered But while thinking of the words and the purport of the song in relation to Preeti's life and those of others, who can say where her destiny lies? What had her parents, while immersed in joy, dreamt at the birth of their first and the only baby?

* * *

Twenty-five-year-old Aparajita is the only daughter of her widowed mother who works in a government office. From the time she entered her adolescence, she became hypersensitive, less communicative and easily irritatable. Having finished her schooling, she joined a college, but she became increasingly more withdrawn, kept herself from others, stayed aloof in the gloomy room and when disturbed she would explode. In the meantime, some relatives' advice that marriage would correct her led Aparajita to the marriage altar that was arranged

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in a vague manner, but then at the wedding night itself she behaved queerly. She could not adapt herself, neither as a wife nor as a daughter-in-law. As soon as her mental illness was discovered she was sent back to her mother and the groom's family accused that Aparajita's mother had deceived them. Later, Mother's anxious efforts yielded a reconciliation and she was taken back to her husband and a baby-daughter was born to them. But the strangeness in her behaviour grew more and she was once again sent back to her Mother while the baby remained with its father. Thus she became a ping-pong ball between the husband and the mother, and the more the chance of returning to her husband faded, the more she became mentally deranged, and now she hated both her husband and her mother. So, avoiding all, she erected a transparent wall between herself and others, a wall through which one could see her but could not touch her.

* * *

I could go through the case-history of not more than three patients. That was enough to make my head go round. Preeti's strange case-history and now this seductive and romantic looks of her. The sorrowful history of Sandhya who is in the state of ecstasy on one side and Aparajita's unfathomable mind on the other.

* * *

A doctor as she is, she knows the causes and cures of various diseases, but herself a victim of such a disease, she, when gripped by it, does not even know what has happened to her. Slipped off life's struggle, she laughs, screams and talks in a different world where neither the sane people's thought nor their help could reach.

Nowadays, smearing her head and the stone with vermillion, she, under the peepul tree, begs of God what no one knows, but I guess that she asks God for nothing more than her house-hold life, husband and her daughter.

* * *

I am quite often with Preeti, yet I cannot find the real Preeti. No matter

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how tightly I embrace her, I cannot touch her soul. What has concealed that soul? It is as if a transparent glass wall stands between us—she on the other side and I on this side. I can talk to her, see her but touch I can't. Or, she is very much here with me, right in front of my eyes yet her presence lies somewhere else.

* * *

And as Preeti left, the long, open veranda and the frontyard of the hospital looked empty and deserted and my study on her remained incomplete. How those civilized men will satiate their lust taking advantage of Preeti's mental disorder, I don't know.

* * *

I feel that this mental hospital, and my study cases – Preeti, Sandhya and Aparajita – are such a turning point in my life, such a sore on my emotions that I, even after my being back to Darjeeling, keep returning to this place in my memories and thoughts. Literature is my favourite subject. I love to read literature and sometimes I indulge in writing short-stories for which I go looking for characters and plots. However, today I do not feel any dearth of such material. Each and every case-study, with the stories of their life's absurdity, stands upright in front of me. Whom to write on and whom to leave out? So very many stories, so many characters but nowhere there is the sign of light and nowhere, the shadow of happiness. All those stories are the wounds of the heart, the stories of uncertainties. How to align these tracts in my writing? How to give expression to these lost destinies?

By now, I had grown a little bit accustomed and immune to the eerie atmosphere of the hospital. I have more or less convinced myself that my job is to strengthen my own self so that I may be able to help these unfortunates return to their normal lives, but not to be affected by them and become weak myself.

With the belief that mental disorder is just like any other disease, this mental hospital is no different from other hospitals and we, the nurses, are here for these sick people, I did, in a way, accept this most absurd aspect of life. Indeed, my job is to witness other's agony. There are some diseases that demand medicines lifelong. So

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is mental illness that needs, alongside the medicines, special care from family members, which is very difficult. Only a dedicated and sensitive person may be able to understand it; otherwise no knowledge and power can understand the strangeness of this disease. No sane people's pride and power can hold it. It is like a terrible storm that breaks and destroys all barriers and embankments in its way.

* * *

Sometimes they are more alert and self-centred than conscious people and sometimes utterly confounding and shattered. I rather feel like going to them with only love and sincerity leaving behind all my knowledge and methods. The storm demonstrates its furious might and gradually calms down. Whatever limited knowledge I had is now vanquished and all the experiences I've gained from my job also proved futile. So now I arm myself with nothing but my sensitivity and tender feelings to approach them.

Every object is beautiful in its own way. Nature is beautiful in its forms, in its eternity and in blossoming a thousand-coloured flowers of hope. Beauty lies everywhere, but only a perceiving eye can see it. I found beauty in the eyes of Preeti that would see colourful dreams, in the love and ecstasy of Sandhya, in Aparajita's ego and melodious voice and in Dr. Bharati's housewifery. Ugliness was like their derangement. They were like a river that, when flowed quietly, looks beautiful, but when wild and violent, looks horrid.

* * *

"Didi, has Preeti, been admitted here again?"

"Yes, gone violent again. They say it's nearly a week since she stopped eating anything. No medicine. No sleep either."

"But why in that cold room? Can't she be kept in a room this side?"

I don't know if I should make such a comment.

"They say she made a lot of trouble at home. Last evening, she kicked that old servant and nearly killed him. She is dangerous for others at the moment."

The attendants left. I have not been able to concentrate on the subject of my study, however. I've to complete it, but at this

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moment, I have an urge to see Preeti. I directed a glance at the teacher. She was saying something to one of our friends. I covered the page I was writing on with a blank leaf and left the pen on it and walked towards that prison cell-like room. It is dark with only two lattice windows high up to let air pass. There, in a corner on the damp floor, was Preeti, her back leaned against the wall, legs bent, her arms rested on them. Her appearance was like that of the storm just calmed down.

"Preeti..!" – I called her softly, but she did not move.

"Preeti..!" – I repeated, glancing at the teacher.

"Preeti, look at me."

This time she slowly lifted her head and looked at me blankly and without a blink.

"Come over to me, to this door."

My hands are on the rail. My voice is beseeching and tender. I hadn't expected she would respond so quickly. Slowly she rose and lightly and without a word she came up to the door and stood in front of me. The iron grille separated us from one another.

My hand, reaching out to her through the grille, caressed one of her cheeks and I said: "Why did you come here, Preeti? Had I not told you not to come to this place again? Didn't you keep it in your mind?"

It was as though she could not hear me speak. Where is she now? I see her right in front of my eyes, I touch her but her soul and psyche are uncomprehendingly far from me.

"Do you know me?" I ask, with my heart strangely heavy.

"Who is Pritam?"

She, in a commanding tone, hurled her question in reply to mine.

I thought for a while. What shall I say? A pair of big eyes are awaiting my answer.

"Pritam is your friend, right?"

"I've many friends, but who is Pritam?"

Oh! What a hook! I felt choked. But suddenly I blurted out:

"Pritam is your best friend, think you are made for each other."

And soon life stirred in her desiccated body, her darkened lips slowly curled into an attractive smile that seemed to have emerged

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from the depth of her soul, and it gently spread over both her eyes.

Ah! Love it was! Abstaining from food for five or six days, her stomach had become as hollow as Sarangi, her figure had shrivelled, and now shut up in a cell-like damp cabin, her straying mind was suddenly revived by a hint of the feeling of love. As though the sun was shining in her soul.

* * *

Defeated in life's struggle and defeated by the lowest ebb of the mind, Aparajita left the hospital hurriedly without a whit of change. Again there was a void in my heart. And all through the evening and even while sleeping Aparajita's melodious voice haunted my ears,

> Nobody understands, no body
> how the heart suffers.

Indeed, how to understand, Aparajita, such a puzzling world, the riddle of life and beyond that the enigma of different minds and their incomprehensible aspirations, mysterious views and ways of thinking?

Easily annoyed and provoked and frequently aloof from others, Aparajita, I think, was touched a little by the genuineness of my feelings. Her haze-covered mind that would alternately love and hate the same person, had gone leaving behind a deep impact on my psyche which could be felt on the quiet waves of my love to them.

* * *

Asmita was abducted from near the college by a gang of dissolute boys. Having raped her in a desolate place they had thrown her in front of a running truck. The truck hit her slightly but did not kill her. A tender young girl, who would fly like a bird with all the dreams in her eyes, how can she now survive the trauma of falling prey to such a horrific incident? How will she be able to keep her mental balance? Having been forced to experience the trauma of such an experience, how can she remain sane? Her face, covered with white sheet, she thinks what I don't know. What is in her mind? Is she haunted by the same incident or has she lost all her sense? It seems there is no sign of

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life in her eyes, in her face and in her whole physical appearance. The only movement is that of her breath.

On the day I knew of the fact, fire burned in me. A gang rape and after that the loss of a limb. The mental state and the agony of a raped girl defy all attempts at description. How can one say what indescribable torment and agony are suffered when a girl is raped? Words are far too inadequate to express them. To fall prey to such a most defiling assault for a girl with self esteem ! Having undergone this type of trauma, what would I have done if I was in Asmita's place? I can't say. However, I know, whatever I would have done would not have been different from the storm that blows violently ruffling the surface of equilibrium.

But Asmita wore the cloak of despair and under this cloak she hid and cramped herself, shut out all the signs of her life, all her heart-beats and movements turned lifeless. Asmita, (dignity in its literal meaning) and all her female dignity was shattered, trampled by devils. And now she was plunged into the depth of despair. But she must not be allowed to go further down, she should, at all costs, be pulled up and filled with courage to live.

Days are passing. Wounds over Asmita's body healed. However, the wounds on her psyche are yet to heal. Nevertheless, she at least began to give vent to her despair, little by little. One day she said, "When those cruel ones laid me bare I felt bereft of my self; when they raped me I lost my consciousness and when my leg was amputated I became lifeless. I know nothing about it as I was unconscious. When one is not conscious what is suffering, Didi? Taken all in to account, I am but an endless void."

* * *

Greeting him with a smile I walked to him and before I introduced myself he joined his both palms to greet me and said, "I know you are a student of a nursing college. Am I wrong?"

"Oh! You are right."

"But from which place?"

"From Darjeeling."

"That's why I felt a cool breeze as you were walking towards me," he said smiling wide.

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I was amazed to hear his well-constructed language and said, "It's a delight to meet such a personality like you. May I know your name?"

I am Rajat, lovingly called Raja, but now this name is slowly losing its significance and meaning. If my guardians come to take me back I may be released any time. I'm waiting for them."

"You are much younger than me, so I will call you Raja, too."

"I don't mind. But I'm not what you might have thought of me. I am full of confusions, shattered and ruined."

* * *

"Will you post this letter for me?" A bare letter without an envelope. "This is addressed not to my home, not to my friend either, but to Swami Satya Sai Baba. You will drop it for me, won't you?"

Fixing me in between belief and disbelief, he stared at me.

But this time, with great resolution, I said, "Swami is above all laws and hindrances of us mortal beings. You, too, know this, Rajib Babu. I'll surely post this letter for you."

The hand with the letter that stretched towards me was suddenly withdrawn. Still some grains of disbelief? He then said, "Please wait. I'll first communicate with him by touching the earth with this letter—the earth which the Swami has stepped on."

He bowed down low so that the letter in his hand could touch the ground. I was awestruck. O God! How to fathom Rajib Babu's mind? How to unravel the mystery of his illness? I am completely at my wit's end how as to find the line of thread entangled in so many knots.

Handing me the letter he declared, "Whether you post it or not, it makes little difference now. I've already communicated with Swami."

I took the letter and brought it into my room. I had to put it in the envelope with a postage stamp. But before doing so, I ran my eyes over the letter. It contained just a few lines, but written in neatly constructed beautiful English. So ran the lines:

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Shree Satya Sai Baba
Brindavan Bhavan
Bangalore.

Revered Swami,
Thousand Salutations.

I am imprisoned in a lunatic asylum for the past several days. My father passed away just a month ago and my mother is all alone at home. Swami, I pray to Thee to forgive all my mistakes I committed in the past and free me from here.

These days I am not in a good state of mind that may enable me to write better than this. If there is any error in the letter, I pray for Thy forgiveness.

I will write to Thee again and I will keep writing.

Thine,
Rajib.

I was immensely moved by the letter. I slipped it into the envelope, wrote the address as it was in the letter, pasted a postage stamp and before dropping into the mail-box I closed my eyes for a few seconds, "Swami, free this unfortunate fellow not only from this hospital but from his illness itself. Make him fully healthy in his mind."

And...gently I dropped the letter into the mail-box.

* * *

Meera raved, "I might get killed any time at the hands of this crackpot. When in a fit of lunacy, he is a terror, he strikes with anything he lays hands on. If he didn't find anything, he strikes with his clenched fist. Now I've reached the limit of my endurance. Many a time my mother tried to separate us, I too wanted to get rid of him but I don't know what stopped us from separating. My old mother cannot sleep peacefully these days. She always complains, how can a mother have the luxury of sleep when her daughter is constantly in torment and terror? It's long since my mother started guarding me, keeping herself wide awake."

What shall I say? Gopal is the one mentally suffering and I am his nurse. Who should I side with? Gopal? His wife? Or that

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old mother who spends one sleepless night after another. Helplessness all around—there's Gopal whose mental illness keeps him away from living a normal life; there's Meera living in fire, and the old mother tormented by her daughter's misery.

* * *

Now let me take a breath. I want, for a few moments, to take my mind off Rajat, Gopal, Meera and Rajib. The more you get into it, the darker it the grows and you will be more like a crow in a dense fog. As I think of this mysterious mind of man, its endless layers, and the tiny drop of my knowledge in this vast ocean and my ambition to serve them, I find myself at a complete loss. I have plunged into the pool, I don't know how to swim, yet I am moving my arms and legs laboriously to get out of it.

These broken hearts, fragmented minds that have slipped off the life's hold. What form does an object take once it is broken into fragments? So are these severed minds—some of them pour out their hearts in tears, some laugh exultingly and triumphantly; some, withdrawing from all, live in isolation. Some appear to have lost in a great void while others violently assert their force and existence. There are some, who, living constantly in imaginary fear and terror, carry a dagger in their armpits day and night.

* * *

But having paid a visit to this house I found nothing but the domineering personality of the eldest member of the family, his arrogant manner, the hushed breath of the whole family, Preeti's ruined health with the disordered mental condition and some suffocating moments. I walked out of that house like the one returning from the water source without quenching thirst. As I was passing through the gate with bougainvilleas as I heard the main door shut behind me. Feeling heavier than before I, while walking, would turn my head towards that house, and then arriving at a point I boarded a bus. And now I am back in my room. Thus ends my longing to know something more about Preeti, to have a look at the wonderful smile that would rise on her lips, to talk with her and offer my

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help. Her dream to see herself as a bride, to walk in a fitting blouse and sari alongside her husband and many other fond dreams will perhaps never be possible outside the world of her inner self. Simple and common dreams for others, but how costly and remote for Preeti! Any time she may go wild and abnormal, stop eating, hurl her medicines and will be brought to the hospital once more and medicines and treatment will again soothe her. Again she will be taken back home and she will be drowsing amidst her colourful day-dreams. Some day, losing her equilibrium, her inner life will parch for want of sap, and her beautifully dark and dreamy eyes will close their lids, the lips that bloomed in charming smile will go lifeless, and that will be the end of the story. But the mansion with the blossoming bougainvillea and the climbing creeper on the roof will remain standing as it does today.

I was heading towards the door that was only for ladies. At that moment two middle aged female attendants entered escorting a female patient by the arms. Gosh! The young girl was none other than Preeti, the very same Preeti whose suffering I often feel in me like a septic sore that was now once again bleeding. In salwar-kurta, with hair-locks loosened on her back she looked pale and wearied. She had lost hold of reality long back and now she has perhaps lost even her dreams. Supported by the attendants she was feebly dragging her feet. Where has that charm of her eyes vanished? And that enchanting smile? They are instead dry and desiccated, the lips are bluish and dull, under the eyes are dark patches and her fair hands hung with their thin and fragile fingers. My feet became leaden, I stood still, my heart stopped beating. The two women are steering her, and she is somnambulantly walking past me, doesn't see me, nor recognize me, as if I did not exist. Nothing makes an impression on her eyes and in her mind. Only an invisible energy is causing her legs move.

I was stupefied for some time, yet without moving a pace I turned round my head. As they stepped onto the veranda they opened the door of the cell with the damp floor. Without any protest she walked into it and was dissolved in its darkness. The door was latched from the outside and locked.

I still stand at the same corner from where I can see behind me those cells with iron grille that imprison the unfortunate Preeti

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and those who are now in their drug-induced sleep. And in front of me stands a door that leads to the vast stretch of earth and farther beyond, into the midst of hills, where rests a small world of mine where there runs the streams and rivers challenging my courage to cross them and where there are an unknown number of battles to fight.

Several moments passed, with me standing transfixed. But I have to leave. Even if I want to, my steps are not allowed to move back today. I search my heart and find the rhododendron trees still standing high on the edge of the frontyard of my house. With my eyes welled up, I stumble towards the door and then, passing through the main gate, out I come.

Translated from Nepali by Manprasad Subba

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Authorspeak: Jatindra Mohan Mohanty

I have written about Oriya poetry to some extent because it provides fruitful ground to my criticism. Not only past authors, but contemporary authors too, have given me opportunity to analyze and evaluate, and to establish proper perspective and focus. It has always been a great deal of excitement on my part to be in contact with those scintillating poetic minds and help them to be put in the circuit of communication—probably an extremely important role a critic can play anywhere anytime. But the other aspect is also equally important: that is, at par with the poets in understanding and comprehending the complications of life, critical understanding is equalized with poetic understanding and both provide equal formulations of sensibility. The competent critic, I may say, is like a competent creative artist. Whereas in the creative artist the critical mind functions as a subterranean stream and what is seen outside is a vast expansion of creative surface, with the critic on the other hand, the creative mind goes underneath, and what is seen outside is solid reasoning and logistic arrangement. It would be wrong to separate a good critic from a good writer. They function together, only at different levels.

When the permanent values of life are in the danger of being destroyed or lost it becomes necessary to rehabilitate them for the survival of the race. At its deepest perception criticism aims at doing this: a rehabilitation of values, or more fundamentally, 'judgments of value'. Language can be the referential language of science or the emotive language of poetry, and in an age of mass-media, advertisement and journalism where language is perpetually debased, it becomes an urgent duty of the critic to establish the custom of responding to literary communication with a unified sensibility.

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From the Award-winning Book *Suryasnata*

Jatindra Mohan Mohanty

Chapter 17

Ancient Oriya Poetry

Though the span of ancient Oriya literature is usually taken from Sārāla Das to Bhimā Bhoi, a period of about 450 years, yet the times before Sarala may be considered in this context, in which case the total period would be about 550 years. During that period, innumerable poems were written, and a large number of Kavyas too. When all that as a whole is considered, certain trends become increasingly clear. In course of time, as the political, social and religious situations were either changed or came to be different, the poetic trends or poetic perceptions also underwent changes. But in any discussion of ancient Oriya poetry that which makes a reader increasingly alert, is a general cohesiveness and suppleness of these trends. The poetic awareness had changed as life's awareness changed. The poet's attention and preoccupation had become different from individual to individual, and from time to time. Again, the external influences as well as the relative merits of that, got mixed up with the growth of poetry. Yet, in spite of that, the compactness and changes of the poetic structure and poetic experience as seen in ancient Oriya poetry, is both amazing and exhilarating.

The first important phase, which is also the first phase chrono-

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logically, is of the epic. Immediately after Sārāla Das's *Mahabharat* in the 15th century, we have *Ramayana (Jagamohan Ramayana)* of Balarām Das in the early part of the 16th century, followed by two epic-type, extremely significant works, *Bhagabat* of Jagannāth Das and *Harivansa* of Achyutānanda Das. None of these were original works related to the respective poets, and excluding *Ramayana*, the other three, from the point of view of story, were complementary to each other. But all the four were also neither literal translations, and in each, innumerable facets of contemporary life were enjoined and enlisted. Again, the language of these works was not the language of translation, it was the language of original composition. That is, like a poet experimenting on the power and flexibility of his contemporary language, the mentality of experimentation is clear in these works, and leaving aside the sequences of story and their complexities, only from the point of view of language used, these were extremely original works, and the strength and easiness of the spoken language of the Orissa of the 15th and 16th centuries could be seen in them time and again. Generally the range of story-telling was both vast and extensive in these works. A number of incidents have been taken from the original Sanskrit, but in the environment of Oriya-writing, frequent changes have been made to many events, and in addition, many more new events have been added. In the 15th and 16th centuries, particularly from the accession of Kapilendra Dev (1435) till the death of Prataprudra Dev (1538), for about 100 years, it was a glorious time for Orissa, and Sārāla, Balarām, Jagannāth and Achyutā were poets of this period, and expectably the sense of glory and pride of the period got reflected in their epics and poetry.

The second important phase is related to narrative poetry or Kavya. Beginning from the 16th century till the mid-19th, these Kavyas were written at different times, and we come to know of more than 40 such Kavyas written during this period. They can be divided mainly into three groups. In the first group we have such Kavyas that had secular content and dealt with fictional stories, for example, *Parimalā* (Parimala) by Narsingha Sena (16th), *Sashisenā* (Sashi Sena) by Pratap Ray (16th), *Chāta Ichhabāti* (The Student and Ichhabati) by Banamali Das (16th), *Kalabāti* (Kalabati) by Bishnu Das (16th-17th), *Kānchi Kāveri* (Kanchi Kaveri) by Purusottam Das (17th), *Lilābati* (Lilabati) by

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Raghunāth Rāj Harichandan (17th), *Lābanyabati* (Labanyabati) and *Koti Brahmānda Sundari* (The Beauty of Million Worlds) by Upendra Bhanja (17th-18th), *Sarbānga Sundari* (Beauty in All Limbs) by Lokanāth Bidyādhar (17th-18th), *Kanaklatā* (Kanakalata) by Tribikrama Bhanja (18th), *Sasirekhā* (Sasirekha) by Padmanāva Srichandan (18th), *Rasasindhu Sulakhyanā* (Sulakhyna of the Sea of Rasa) by Kesabrāj Harichandan (18th) and *Samar Taranga* (The Waves of War) by Brajanath Badajena (18th) etc. The second group consisted of Kavyas where the subject matter was taken from the epics. These were, *Rāmabibhā* (The Marriage of Ram) by Arjun Das (16th), *Kapatapāsā* (The False Dice) by Bhimā Dhibar (17th) *Nala Charita* (The Story of Nala) by Madhusudan Das (17th), *Bichitra Ramayana* (The Multi-Coloured Ramayana) by Biswanāth Khuntiā (18th) and *Prabandha Purna Chandra* (An Essay of Full-Moon) by Indumani Mohāpātra (18th-19th) etc. The third group included Kavyas that were based on the *Bhagabat*, and mainly portrayed the childhood days of Sri Krishna, particularly his dalliances at Gopa. The Kavyas were *Rahasya Manjari* (The Mysterious Flowers) by Devadurlav Das (16th), *Rasakallola* (The Waves of Rasa) by Dinakrushna Das (17th-18th), *Prema Panchāmruta* (The Five-fold Nectar of Love) by Bhupati Pandit (17th-18th), *Bidagdha Chintāmoni* (The Love-Lorn Chintamoni) by Abhimanyu Sāmantsinhār (18th) *Mathurā Mangala* (The Journey to Mathura) by Bhakata Charan Das (18th) and *Jugma Rasāmruta Lahari* (The Waves of Double Nectar) by Sadānanda Kavisurya Brahamā (18th) etc. All these Kavyas, to point out once again, were written in a period of 350 years, and counting just the numbers, the secular and fictional Kavyas exceeded all others. In other words the subject-matter in these Kavyas were neither taken from the epics or from the Purans, nor in anyway dependent on life-accounts of Ram or Krishna. The stories were purely fictional and the characters were all fictionary. Even a 17th century Kavya like *Kanchi Kaveri,* which was based on a legend related to Lord Jagannath, excelled in fictional narratives and accounts.

The third important phase included innumerable short poems and poems of lyrical content that were organised depending on the relative simplicity or complexity of the poet's emotion. In a general way these poems could be divided into a number of groups. For example, first of all, such poems that dealt with love. A number of poets composed poems based on the love-relationship of Radha

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and Krishna. They were Raghu Arakhita, (16th), Rasānanda Nabaghana Chand (17th), Dinakrushna, Banamali (18th), Kavisurya Baladev Rath (18th-19th) and Gopālkrushna (18th-19th) etc. Again, away from Radha and Krishna, intense love emotions of common protagonists were also expressed, as in the 'chaupadi' and songs of Dhanajoy Bhanja (17th) and Upendra Bhanja, and even in the poems of Kavisurya and Gopal Krushna. These on the one hand provide the mental uncertainty and attachment of the love-emotion, and on the other, the intense excitement arising out of a contemplation of the physical beauty of the lady. Another group, equally important like the 'love-group', consists of poems of prayer, devotion and of spiritual contemplation, known as 'bhajan', 'janana' and 'prarthana'.These are addressed to Rama, Krishna, or Siva or Durga and also extensively to Lord Jagannath. Then, apart from particular gods or goddesses, the poets also contemplated on 'Sunnya' (Emptiness) or 'Parambrahma' (The Ultimate Spirit) in a general spiritual frame—mystical expression beyond body, and yet expressed in the images related to the body. These were eloquently expressed in the poems of Achyutananda, Jasobanta (16th) Sisu Anant (16th) and Bhima Bhoi (19th). But the poems of prayer, particularly to Lord Jagannath, could be seen in most of the poets beginning from Jagannath Das through Raghu Arakhita, Dinakrushna, Sālbeg (17th), Arta Das (18th), Chandan Hazuri (18th), Nityānanda (18th), Bannamali, Bāhudā (19th), Kavisurya and Gouracharan (19th) etc. These were important constituents of ancient Oriya poetry. At the same time there were other types of poems that had different motivations and subject matter. For example, the poems concerned with religion and philosophy may be noted, some good examples being *Sisu Veda* (14th), *Amarakosa* (14th) *Jnānpradipa Geeta* and *Chārikhāni* by Achyutananda, *Chhandā Chautisā* by *Nathiā Lokanath* (17th) etc. At the same time there used to be poems related to man's character and ethics of living; for example, the Abadhuta episode of Jagannath's *Bhagabat,* Jasobanta's *Govindchandra Tikā* and Sisu Ananta's *Hetu Udaya Bhagbat* etc. Also the pain and joys of individuals as when the heart deals with the object of affection, like that of a mother for her child, could be seen in poems such as in *Kesaba Koili* (Markand Das, 15th), *Kānta Koili* (Balaram Das), or *Milan Chautisa* (Arjun Das) and *Rasakullya Chautisa* (Damodar Das, 16th). In short, the total structure of ancient Oriya poetry was chiefly

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organized through epics, Kavyas and small or lyrical poems and the changes and evolutions in poetic experiences and preoccupations that attended thereto.

The ancient Oriya poet, while conscious of himself, was also conscious of his environment, of the social rules and regulations around, and general ways of living. From the 15th, through the 19th century, lots of changes took place in the political situation in Orissa, when the administration passed from the independent Hindu kings to the Pathans, the Moghuls, Marathas and at the end to the British, and that generally affected people's lives. But in spite of that, life as a whole in Orissa remained agriculture-based and rooted to the organisation of villages and to their organic cohesiveness. This is an important aspect of ancient Oriya poetry that portrayed the apparent uncertainty and the underlying certainty of living. We can note innumerable small as well as big items of reality and details of how people live in society. Thus while the poet is involved in his poetry or goes on narrating his story, he unconsciously picks up awareness about contemporary factors, and the reader also becomes conscious of the poet's contemporaneity. Probably the first clear expression of this social consciousness in Oriya poetry could be noted in the 15th century, in a poem entitled *Kalasā Chautisā*, by Bachha Das, which narrates the marriage of Lord Siva with Parbati, in the course of which the contemporary ways of marriage along with the helplessness of women were portrayed and one can also note, interestingly, an implied satire under the apparent joyful noises of marriage. A strong social consciousness as well as pervasive social attitudes also form a part of long narrative poems of Sarala, Balaram, Jagannath and Achyutananda. Particularly the likes and dislikes of the poets were eloquent in their analyses of social issues. A good example was Balaram's *Laxmi Puranā* which narrates Lord Jagannath's quarrels with his consort Laxmi, her banishment from his temple at Puri, and her final return to the temple. The poem also showed a woman's helplessness, how she was an object of compassion, and how she was subjected to the male's whimsicalities. But the poet's motivation is not expressed in satire as we noted in *Kalasa*. It is seen in the arrangement of sequences. That is, even though Laxmi was banished from home she could establish herself outside, and her confidence became her power. There were also other types of

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references to contemporary social issues, the difference between the high and the low castes, the account of poverty and sorrow, man's dependence on woman, and of the compulsions of marriage etc. But the social consciousness of the ancient poet is not as intense or extensive as that of the modern. Yet the various facts of daily life, and the easy naturalness of rural ways, in short, various indications of contemporary life and living, could be seen, both overtly and covertly, in the total period of ancient Oriya poetry, from Sarala to Bhima Bhoi. This remains as a continuing realization, and an important one too, and coupled with intense and intimate mental attitudes, together they provide a rich substantiality to ancient Oriya poetry.

Translated from Oriya by the Author

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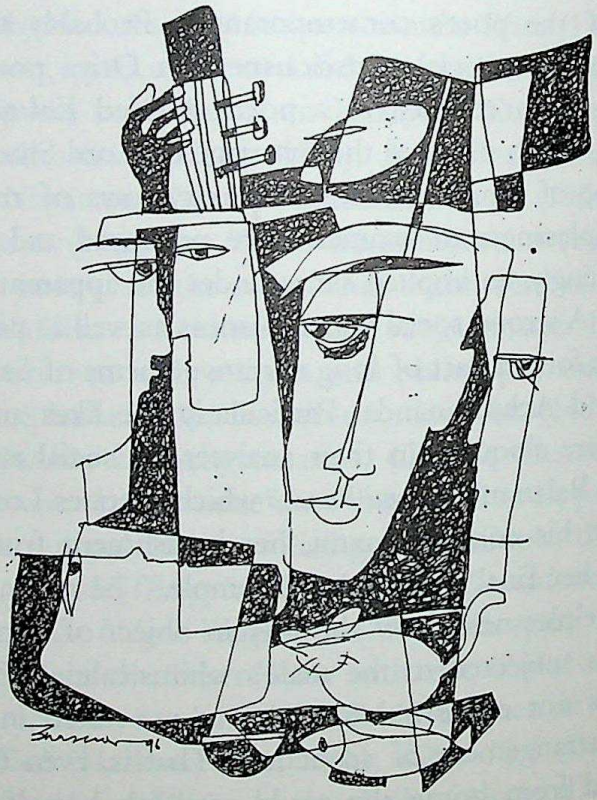

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Authorspeak: Charandas Siddhu

I have always tried to keep the people of my village and my area alive in my language, on the stage. And make them more conscious by narrating the tales of their neighbours and retelling the epochs of their history, so that they could muster courage to free themselves from sinister social customs, delusion and misapprehensions.

Regarding language, I have a firm belief that good literature can be created in one's mother tongue only. Literature is the dialogue/debate created with one's own people in one's own language. I do not want to send reports to the American and the Englishman by writing dramas in English concerning Indians and their good and bad qualities. I want to discuss directly with the sons and daughters of Sweeper Baba Bantu, Weaver Kirpa Ram and shoemaker Khushia Ram. I want to encourage them. I want to kindle the desire for a better future in them. And for all this the most useful medium is our mother tongue.

The topmost of all my heroes and heroines is martyr Bhagat Singh. Since childhood I am listening to the stories of this brave man born in our area. My Doaba is the place of action of Babbar Akalies, who always fought against injustice. My *Bhagat Singh Martyr: Natak Tikri* is the summary and substance of all my works. Bhagat Singh is my ideal. Bhagat Singh is always the source of inspiration to me in fighting against injustice, for waging war against social exploitation, to kill the hypocrisy in the name of religion with the sword of arguments.

During the last thirty years, there is a revolution both in Punjabi drama-writing and staging. Today, the playwrights themselves direct, act, judge and make changes in their dramas.

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From the Award-winning Book *Bhagat Singh Shaheed: Natak Tikri*

C.D. Sidhu

Scene IV

Singers : *Let those who doubt, run after other gods*
For us, a human being is truly the God of the universe.

Amro : My brave brother! Yours is not the age to perish in these deathly cells. I've been weaving dreams. One day, you will ride a mare at the head of your wedding party. I will hold your bridal scarf. And decorate my Sister-in-law. And play with my nephews and nieces!—And you? Our evil fate! You're caged in this jail. [*Cries*]

Bhagat : Amro? Gone mad, have you? The brothers of some sisters will have to go to the gallows....in order that the brothers of other sisters can live to ride the mares in their wedding parties.

Amro : How do I care for the brothers of other sisters? While my own brother remains parted from me?

Bhagat : My dear, dear sister! That's precisely what's wrong with this world. Each sister wants to see only her own brother alive. Each mother longs for happiness only for her own son. That's how countries become colonies.... Amro, instead, you should feel proud. Instil courage into me. For the sake of Mother India, I am going to marry Death.

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Amro : Death? Oh my brother! Utter a happy word.

Kulbir : The judgment hasn't been announced yet. How do you know, such is going to be the verdict?

Amro : Maybe Waheguru will fill the hearts of the White rulers with mercy and justice.

Kulbir : They may sentence you only to life imprisonment... the punishment you are going through already because of the Assembly Bomb Case.

Amro : Father is also going to make another effort.

Kulbir : That may prove successful.

Bhagat : Which effort?

Amro : He's planning to send an application.

Kulbir : To the highest. The Viceroy.

Amro : You wrote a letter to Ram Lal of the Khadi Cloth Store. From Calcutta. Remember?

Kulbir : A postcard? In Urdu?

Amro : It did reach Ram Lal.

Bhagat : Then? What do you propose to do with that letter?

Kulbir : On this postcard, the date can be clearly read—17th December, 1928.

Amro : The day Saunders was shot dead in Lahore.

Kulbir : On the day of the murder, you were in Calcutta. This fact can be established through this letter.

Amro : Father believes, the court is sure to admit the appeal.

Bhagat : [*Angrily*] This is absolutely wrong. I took full part in Saunders' murder. I've declared this fact before everybody. And I will continue to declare it. Do explain it to dear Father. Let him not struggle to raise a mountain of falsehood. Let him not betray our fight for freedom.

Kulbir : Betray? How's he betraying it?

Amro : You won't be drawn into it. The lawyers, on their own, will get you released on the evidence of this letter. Why must you suffer in jail?

Bhagat : You are behaving like idiots. Lies and deceptions cannot win freedom for a country. Nations survive on the virtue of true sacrifices. Tell dear Father: "Don't try a coward's trick to release me." Such an application will earn me only a bad name. There'll be no other benefit.

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Kulbir : Benefit there can be. Do believe him.

Amro : You can escape the gallows.

Bhagat : Raving like mad! You are! Life imprisonment I am already going through. You cannot secure my release from the previous case by citing fake letters. There's no time for further discussion. Say no to Father. Say no to the lawyer, Pran Nath Mehta. We will not file an appeal. Just think over this. We did not contest the case. The Tribunal is going to deliver an ex parte judgment. Now, through such appeals, why are you trying to destroy what we have already achieved? Kulbir, have you brought the books?

Kulbir : *Soviets at Work* isn't available. I'll send Karl Livicant's *Militarism* two or three days later with Mr. Mehta. Here are nine books.

Amro : Grandma cooked green leaves for you. Mother baked corn bread.

[Hands over the pack]

Bhagat : Great! Ma and Grandma are the only wise ones in the family. Our Father hasn't uttered a sensible syllable since he became a disciple of that dotard Gandhi.

[Akbar Khan enters]

Akbar : Bhagat, time's up. Hand over those books too. We must check them.

Bhagat : Uncle, clear these fields, factories and workshops first. I must start it by evening.

Amro : Granny and Mamma are desperate to meet you.

Kulbir : They will come next Monday.

Bhagat : By then, the Tribunal will have delivered the judgment. Kulbir! Steady your heart! The Babbar lions of Doaba never shed tears. Amro! Your weeping shouldn't dishearten your brothers! [*They embrace and go out*] Send the other books soon!

Akbar : Revered Brother Randhir Singh is coming. I've sent the message with Teja Singh Chuharkana.

Bhagat : Thanks. That's a real favour. Now share with me another virtuous counsel.

Akbar : About what?

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Bhagat : What must I choose to do first? Should I read the book on the French Revolution? Or, eat green leaves and corn bread sent by Grandma?

Akbar : Waste no brains on this choosing. Throw the book into the fire. Eat the food.

Bhagat : No, Uncle. We Punjabis have been eating green leaves and corn bread since centuries. Today we need wisdom. We need books.

Akbar : The tomes that you're always poring over contain nothing but unadulterated foolishness. Eat the food first.

Bhagat : I've got it! Uncle, between these two activities there need be no dilemma of choosing. I can read a book and eat my food at the same time. Can't I?

[Randhir Singh and Teja Singh enter. Akbar Khan goes out]

Randhir : Hail Waheguru Ji's Khalsa! (*All three*) Victory to Waheguru!

Bhagat : I touch your feet, Revered Brother.

Randhir : No! No! My dear brother! The feet of the Guru alone should be touched.

Bhagat : A happy day! I've succeeded in meeting the renowned sage.

Randhir : You are a courageous young man. Your companions too are great warriors. My humble self was zealous to meet you.

Bhagat : The sacrifices made by you fighters of the Ghadar movement have always lighted the path for us. Please infuse strength into us so that we can follow your footsteps and dedicate the rest of our breathing moments to breaking the shackles of Mother India.

Randhir : God alone bestows strength. The True Guru with the royal insignia alone blesses us with valour.

Teja : The Great King himself appeared to His Holiness! On several occasions! Many a great saint could not equal His lofty ideals.

Randhir : No, Sardar Teja Singh Ji. The grace of the Guru upon me is a matter of deep mystic knowledge. It must be kept confidential. This secret should not be revealed to all and sundry.

Teja : But, Venerable Brother, you hold Bhagat Singh very

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dear. Shut up in the death cell. Standing on the gallows. It would be an act of great mercy of the true guru if Bhagat Singh too can know about the miracles that occurred in your presence.

Randhir : The Gurus cast their merciful glances on me a hundred times. Touched me with their lotus hands. But, Mr. Chuharkana, this is not the hour for revealing mystic miracles. Mr. Bhagat Singh, first, you command us. What purpose did you conceive for inviting my humble self to this conversation?

Bhagat : Revered Sir, instruct me. How must I devote the remaining days of my life to the welfare of humanity?

Teja : The Sage tells us. Once, in the sacred morning hours, at the Aibtabad Sikh Temple, He was sitting all alone. Reciting the Japuji scripture. He raised his eyes. Lo! The flywhisk was swinging! On it own!! Over the holy book! Our Eleventh Guru! The conch-shells started sounding! The bells started ringing! Wasn't that so, Venerable Brother?

Randhir : Mr. Teja Singh, every word about the might of the House of the Gurus is absolutely true. Our spiritual guides are omnipotent. They are moving the whole world. Their divine power pervades the entire universe. However, with both my hands folded, I beseech you. Let the mysterious happenings of my life remain unrevealed.

Bhagat : Respected Brother, may I venture a request?

Randhir : Please do?

Bhagat : By which method can we emancipate the poor from poverty? Through which device can the workers and peasants snatch political power from feudal lords and other exploiters? What's your experience in this sphere? What's your suggestion?

Randhir : O Lion-hearted! There's only one panacea for all ills. Only one remedy for all diseases.

Bhagat : Which one?

Randhir : The Sikh scriptures! The word of the True King! Recite the name of the Lord. Repeat the name of Waheguru.

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Bhagat : *[Laughing]* Revered Brother, let's suppose the labourers and peasants of India start reciting the scripture, morning and evening. Will they succeed in winning freedom from slavery of the capitalists? Will the poor become rich?

Randhir : Bhagat Singh, don't laugh like the conceited atheists. The Sikh holy book is an all-conquering arrow. It can destroy all enemies. It can release the poor from all afflictions.

Bhagat : Is this power confined only to the Sikh holy book? Can it be found in the sacred books of other sects also?

Randhir : Only the sacred book of the Sikhs possesses this power. The faith in the pious lotus feet of the Ten Prophet-Kings alone can bestow this power.

Teja : The great Sikh holy scripture enshrines the verses of several Hindu saint-poets also. Like Kabir, Ravidas, Namdev.

Bhagat : Do the Vedas and Shastras of the Hindus possess that power? The power that you, Respected Sir, claim for the Sikh scripture?

Randhir : Absolutely not. We are not Hindus. The True King Nanak exposed the hypocrisies of the Brahmins. He refused to wear the sacred thread. He condemned idol-worship. He visited the Ganga at Haridwar. Standing at the ford of Steps-to-God, Nanak denounced the Hindu priests. He held debating contests against the Nath mendicants. He slaughtered their magic spells with the sword of rational thinking. Then He arrived at Mecca. The holy Mecca rotated along the direction of His feet. The Muslim priests were shocked out of their wits. They started trembling before the Great Guru. And surrendered before His divine power.

Teja : Hail Saint Guru Nanak! He is Great!

Bhagat : Do you imply, the Sikh sect is superior to all faiths?

Randhir : Undoubtedly! Every rationalist accepts this argument. Only the Path shown by the Ten Guru-Kings is correct. It's the highest.

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Bhagat : Really? Has God vacated all Hindu temples? Destroyed all churches? Deserted all mosques? These days, does God reside only in the Sikh shrines?

Randhir : Egotism has blinded your eyes. Can't you understand even this much? The Ten Gurus had assumed the human form with the express purpose of reforming the corrupt practices in Hinduism?

Have you forgotten the autobiographical *Vichitra Natak* of the Plumed Lord? –

We came into this world with this mission
God commanded us to defend righteousness
Protect virtue here and there
Crush the evil-doers far and near
With this purpose we took birth
Know, you Sages, in your hearts
We shall succour all the saints
We shall uproot all the sinners!

Teja : Hail! Hail our Plumed Father!

Randhir : The Tenth Guru mentions the earlier incarnations also. Other religions too. Take Islam, for example. The Muslim faith was flawless till the advent of the Great Mohammad. He forbade idolatry. But, as time passed, these religions got afflicted by imperfections. Evil practices took root. Sins multiplied. That's why our Gurus established the Sikh Path. At this hour, there's only one scientific religion in the world: the Sikh Faith. The Sikh Faith alone can rain blessings on the world.

Bhagat : In that case, should the peasants and workers of the world throw away other holy writs? Demolish the tombs and temples and mosques? And become Sikhs?

Randhir : Yes, Sir. Let them don the five K-symbols of the Sikh Faith.

Teja : And recite the Scripture as a daily ritual.

Bhagat : Suppose we accept your suggestion. Let's assume, all the poor people start worshipping at the Sikh shrines. Will the British rulers quit India on their own?

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Randhir : The enemy does not perish on his own.

Bhagat : Then how?

Randhir : Waheguru Himself will bless the swords of the Sikhs with this power. The sword-goddess will slaughter the satanic invaders.

Bhagat : What if the God residing in the Churches of the British rulers proves stronger than your Sikh Waheguru? Just as, for two centuries, the foreigners' God, by firing His cannon, has been routing the Indian God residing in the temples, mosques and gurudwaras? What will you do then? Your Sikh God could not shield the kingdom of Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab, against the colonial rulers. He could not hide our Sikh brethren, our children, our sisters, in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre from the bullets of the imperialists. Where had your Sikh God gone at that hour? Was your God playing upon the flute? Like the Roman tyrant Nero? Was he enjoying the spectacle presented by the dying children? In January 1920, Arur Singh, the Sikh High Priest of your Eternal Throne bestowed the honour of the Holy Scarf on that murderer Dyer. Why didn't your Waheguru stop him? Pardon me, Your Reverence! I honour the great sacrifices made by you, the freedom fighters of the Ghadri group. But history is clamouring for fresh thinking. You must march on to the next stage. Neither Allah nor Waheguru can vanquish the British. Neither Rama nor Krishna can trounce the tyrants. Nor can the incense burning of my Arya Samajist grandfather! Today we need the oneness of the labourers. Let the workers come together. Let them fight for their rights. As they had fought in Russia under the leadership of Lenin. By obeying the scripture penned by sage Karl Marx. If need be, shoot bullets. Explode bombs. No human being can overpower Britannia by muttering meaningless mumbo jumbo. No sacred book can bring my dead brother Kartar Singh Sarabha back to life. This is my earnest submission before you. Here's the real reason behind my meeting with you. You are going out.

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Continue the war. Lead our brethren. But employ the new technique.

Teja : Which technique?

Bhagat : Become the General of the Hindostan Socialist Republican Army. Share the work of Chandra Shekhar Azad. Strengthen the brigade of Sohan Singh Josh, Principal Chhabil Das and Comrade Ramkishan. Propagate scientific socialism. Give up the old idiocy of miracle-mongering. Get rid of blind superstitions. God does not exist anywhere. No man has ever seen God with his own eyes. We ourselves must make all efforts. We ourselves must sacrifice our lives in order to win freedom for India.

Randhir : Come on, Teja Singh. Our effort has been fruitless. Every single word of this atheist is a bowl of burning poison to my ears. Satan is trying to seduce me into betraying my Prophets. God Himself will destroy the pride of such a sinner.

[The Police Inspector Akbar and Baroo the sweeper enter]

Bhagat : Uncle, what's happened? Ma, why are you crying?

Baroo : All cruelty let loose on you!

Akbar : Calamity has hit you!

Bhagat : My Grandma was ill. Has she....?

Akbar : No! Oh my dear dear friend!

Bhagat : Has the Tribunal pronounced the judgment?

Baroo : I was pulling the fan. Standing outside the window. The Superintendent and the Public Prosecutor were talking.

Akbar : Then, I joined him.

Baroo : We heard with alert ears.

Akbar : Though the judgment will be read out to you by the Jailor and the Prosecutor themselves tomorrow or day after.

Bhagat : Is it death sentence for me?

Baroo : Yes.

Akbar : Gallows. For three of you.

Randhir : Waheguru! Waheguru!

Bhagat : Rajguru and Sukhdev also?

Akbar : Yes.

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Bhagat : What's so surprising about it? Ma, why are you crying? Silly! We'd expected hanging. There's none as fortunate as we are. This tiny life is being spent on the cause of a great country.

Akbar : Appeal against this judgment is still possible. Advocate Mehta is coming for a meeting with you.

Teja : The death sentence can be commuted.

Akbar : The Privy Council can reduce the punishment.

Randhir : I've heard, Gandhi will do his utmost to save your lives.

Teja : The entire Congress Party will get united. Moti Lal Nehru had himself come to meet them when they were on hunger strike. Mr. Malvya also.

Akbar : The young leaders are bent on getting you released.

Teja : Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose will not let even a hair of your heads be harmed.

Akbar : I've heard, your father is also going to file an appeal.

Randhir : Bhagat Singh, there's no time now for false pride. My brave brother, return to the safety of the Guru's feet. Save your soul.

Akbar : The time's over.

Bhagat : All right, Revered Brother. You agreed to meet me. I am obliged. Let our revolution—

Many : Live for long!

[Bhagat Singh, Akbar and Baroo go out]

Teja : So young! Barely twenty-three years! Going to the gallows. What brave parents! What brave grand parents! The death sentence hasn't perturbed him. Not a bit. Behaves just like this. All the time. A cheerful face. Laughs and embraces all the jail employees—be it a sweeper or a cobbler.

Randhir : O Plumed King! Bhagat Singh is your forty-first Mukta devotee. Tear off his divorce papers! Now it's our sacred duty to secure the release of his soul from hell. We will bring him back to the Sikh Faith. We will make him grow long hair. And don a turban. In the high heavens, we will make him serve the Ten Guru-Kings! For ever and ever! Teja Singh, we must meet Bhagat Singh again tomorrow!

[Black Out]

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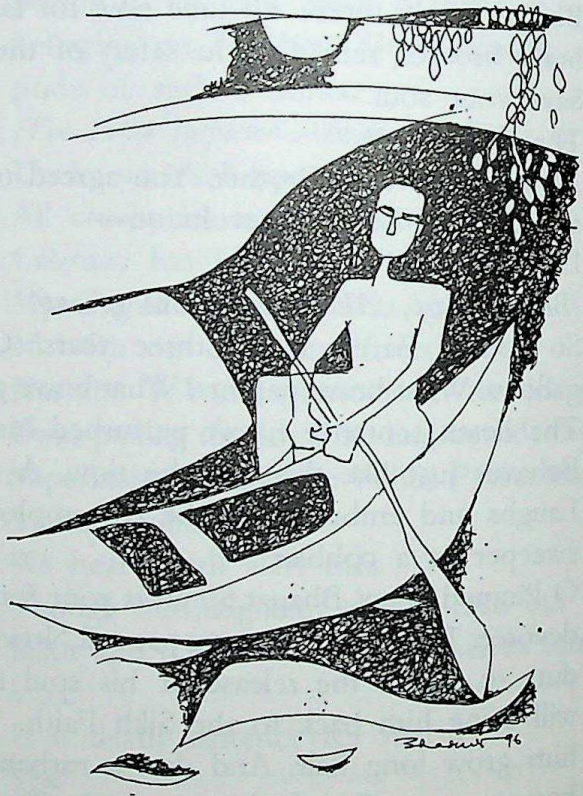
Singers : *The Love of Motherland*
Will never quit my heart
Even my dust will emit
The fragrance of my native soil.

[Curtain]

Translated from Punjabi by the Author



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Authorspeak: Santosh Maya Mohan

There is a tradition in our society of naming our children after the names of God. We do so in a hope that while repeating these names time and again, they will be absorbed in our worldly experiences and we will step, without effort, into the next world. We can get immersed in remembering God.

While expressing myself with my sentimental mind, my foot too stepped on the next rung. I began to feel spiritual joy inside the material one. God is in every molecule. He is everywhere. Our spiritual world abounds in such divine sentences. The point is only to realise it. Fortunately I started feeling the existence of non-body within my body. We all are parts of that very entity. God is engrossed in His perpetual play in the form of us, so He is within me too. He is within my family too. He is all around me. All the actions are His own. We are merely the mediums. He is the giver of joy and treasure of joy behind all. Hence I began to behold my husband as a form of that great Almighty and presented him as 'you' or 'thee' in my poems. His vision was in the form of Shiva and mine was in the form of His wife, the nature Parvati.

In my poems the expressions of 'I' and 'You' (man and woman) give fulfilment to each other and are dedicated thoroughly to each other. This dedication creates a heavenly world full of affection and becomes the abode of the soul. The learned critics, who have honoured my poems by calling it mysticism, have turned them to gold by the Midas touch of their wisdom. But I would like to endorse here some social traditions. Today a culture, born of Western influences, has not only destroyed our families but also has started creating cracks in the marital relations too. Man and wife are forgetting the mutual dedication due to the glamour and glaze of materialism. Now there is hardly any love between them but simply a relation to satisfy their mutual excitement. So, how can we expect human values of any kind from their almost mechanically produced issues?

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From the Award-winning Book: *Simran*

Santosh Maya Mohan

I Measure Infinity

Standing
on the steps of
body's stair,
I try to touch,
by lifting my heels,
bodilessly—fly,
with aspirations and
sitting in the body's prison,
measure Infinity

Translated from Rajasthani by P. R. Gupta

Prayer

The remembrance
all around me,
shatters my sleep.
But I don't wait for you eagerly,
keep my eyes open, and

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thread the cluster of stars,
into the yarn of my sight
like a rosary.
I touch it with
tender finger of my mind, and
awake again, when
sparrows chirp and
start reciting
the prayer of thy name.

Translated from Rajasthani by P. R. Gupta

Earth

Standing, in my courtyard,
that lush green, flourishing
neem tree
covers the nakedness
of the earth
by its leaves.
The earth lives, in
the stone-age.

Translated from Rajasthani by P. R. Gupta

Revenge

First of all
my mother
got pierced,
my nose
my ears, and then
"Gokharu"
One-by-one

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mother, took from me
revenge of her own
piercing.

Translated from Rajasthani by P. R. Gupta

You are Leeladhar

You are a labourer
Take hold of
your iron-tools
and get down
in the womb of earth.

In the cage of ten entrances
search for the imperishable
among perishable.

Scatter
in my empty field
innumerable seeds
with your
perspiration.

You are Leeladhar.
Like this only
continues
your
never-ceasing
Leela.

Translated from Rajasthani by P. R. Gupta

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Recall

Lying unoccupied
are your
all the seven chambers
from Sunday
to Saturday
Because
in each and
every chamber
you make
impressions of
Kumkum-smeared feet
without halting
Move away
on your
further journey.

My only
treasure is
recall of
your rising and setting.

Translated from Rajasthani by Rajni Chhabra

You are the Ocean

You only
unfold
petals of oyster-shells
You only
become
Swati-Nakshatra
You only
fill
pearl

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in the womb
of oyster-shells.
You are
god of rain
as well as
of the ocean.

Translated from Rajasthani by Rajni Chhabra

Stars

As the light
mingles with darkness
the lord of the house
vanishes from sight.
Stealthily
appear
stars
one after another.

Translated from Rajasthani by Rajni Chhabra

Teachings

When
Mother
went to
her village
I remained
at home
Performed all
the household chores
Cleaning utensils
sweeping

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cooking
When Mother
was bed-sticker
I got ready
my younger brothers and sisters
giving them bath
washing their clothes.
For sending them to school
arranged their bags,
searching for their rubber,
pencils and geometry box
and stood at the wayside
waiting for their bus-rickshaw
Thus, my mother
in her absence
taught me
how to be
a mother.

Translated from Rajasthani by Rajni Chhabra

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Authorspeak: Bhaskaracharya Tripathi

Sanskrit is the language of the Vedas. Its every vibration enchants our body, mind and life. In fact, every particle of the world progresses with refinement (*sanskar*); what more is to be said of Sanskrit then! There is no difference between Sanskrit and *sanskar*. In my childhood, my father used to water my creative-*sanskars* while reciting *Shrimad Bhagawat*. At intervals he drenched us with the love-tears of stories. When I learnt versification, I devoted myself to the writing of slokas. When I translated into Sanskrit even in a small way, I was fired with the zeal to get a touch of the poetry-*kalplata* drenched in the *sanskars*.

At the age of sixteen during the summer vacation after the Intermediate examination, I started writing a narrative poem (*khand-kavya*) of Shikhrini-couplets. However, this poem was lost. But, after doing my M.A., I completed *Ajashati Khandkavya* in 1962. And that was published in the reputed Sanskrit magazine of Sahitya Akademi, *Sanskrit Pratibha*.

After completing my education at Prayag, when I reached Madhya Pradesh to join the Government higher education services, the ascetic environment there revived my earlier *sanskars*. During my stay in Chattarpur, Ambikapur, Riva and Bhopal, I carefully collected the colourful mist of the Nirjharini. I felt the tender toothache in the burning Alav (fire in the open), experienced the hide-and-seek play of Rambha in the land filled with spikes of corn; and the ascetic practice of Maharishi Kapil in the foaming waterfalls; and saw the dark beauty of Shri Rama.

❑

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From the Award-winning Book *Nirjharini*

Bhaskaracharya Tripathi

Rama! Our Lord

Rama, you are the Lord
Dwelling always in the forest of our breath
Your lovely sky blue-body
shines brighter in your mendicant's form

You are the protector of all
ever uninvolved
all-knowing, all-encompassing
One Lord, Eternal!

Has not Mohan become?
The Father of the Nation—
Mahatma Gandhi
Chanting your sacred name
it was as if you were dwelling in his heart
for India to regain
her glorious past

Your glories drive away
from the sacred earth

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demonic forces forever
You stir and awaken us
all day and night
Whom else shall we bow down to indeed!

Some say you are omnipresent
Some swear you are the Lord
of the animate and the inanimate alike
To me you are the saviour of your devotees
The redeemer of one cursed to become stone!

This is again a trying time,
an hour of test
No matter eyes see it or are closed
a true perception shall prove them to be,
whether an eye of Laxmana
or the ear of Kumbhakarana that shall be!

Translated from Sanskrit by P. D. Mishra

Chitragupta Temple

Let the lamp of virtue burn
and the charged water worship
Let the flute of conscience play sweet song
in the temple of your heart

The on looking God in your body sees
all that you do
Let darkness never rein your being
whether you delve deep into rainy mud
or you are lost in a youthful spring

Thinner than the thread
your doings follow life
Poison it not with misdeeds

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let happy stars shine and adore
in you a heaven natural

Falling with force like an axe
storming out the leaf of life
intoxication is but a suicide of calm and peace
Let time's tempo darken it not—
the clean chamber of your consciousness.

Translated from Sanskrit by P. D. Mishra

Spring Coming

Flowering the mango tree goes
crazy once again
Emerging out of the youthful saloon of beauty
with pride

Hiding herself so far
afar in a roofed branch of it
thin and dry and forlorn
shaking and shivering
the creeper in tune with the black bee's song
unsung, unheard
blossoming in her heart

The sweet loving lore
of the blushful odour
spreads around
In the heart
of flying birds
in search of partners

Sweet nectar continues to flow
from her deep within
Sitting on the branch of the mango tree
her smiles laughs at agonies

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With flower filaments
spread all over
as the black bee
passes by humming.

Translated from Sanskrit by P. D. Mishra

Amrita

Many sons of this soil speak Dev-vani
even the children of India speak Dev-vani

All secrets of the world
all knowledge sacred
all that shines unfazed in the Vedas—
The seers who
envisioned Rik, Sama, Yajus and Atharva
alone declare the world
an image of the Almighty

An essence of Six Philosophies
salvation is here and instantaneous
God exists in each atom of the Universe—
is the proclamation the realised made

The *Ramayana* is but an expansion of the space
The *Mahabharata* a union of heaven and earth
where the Lord Himself utters the truth
how glory comes through action uninvolved

Sanskrit is no less than the nectar
that flows from the great poetry of yore
where body and soul get uplifted
declare critics of literature.

Translated from Sanskrit by P. D. Mishra

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Authorspeak: R. Vairamuthu

The sound of the splash of the oar in the waters of Kerala – the whispering lilt that is heard in the bamboo forests of Assam – the milky stream that descends down the lap of the Himalaya and their rippling echo – the picture nature has painted on the shores of the Chilika lake in Orissa – the miner of Dhanbad with a film of coal dust on his body and the tears that trickle down his cheek – the farmer ploughing the field with a single plough and his expressions of frustration – the foggy and the smoggy atmosphere of the cities and metropolises and the exhausted bodies of the populace breathing each other's breath, the miseries of the labourers—to reflect these, there is no other choice except literature. That is why even in this age of consumer culture, literature has not lost its relevance.

Why does the breeze offer its opulence to mankind? Is it because you offer your obeisance to it? It has been performing its duties from the beginning of creation. It is here now and it will be made use of in the future also. Even if you don't offer it a pedestal of worship, it will continue performing its duties. A good literary creation is a similar phenomenon. It is bound to perform its duty.

In the coming years the duties of the intellectuals will grow multifold. The globalisation is an economic giant, who may swallow many countries and many language also.

Research predictions show that by 2063 A.D. only five scripts will survive. This sends a shiver down our spines.

Will your mother tongue survive, is a million dollar question. We have to prepare for that eventuality even from now. Has literature any reply? Society is anxiously waiting.

❑

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From the Award-winning Book: *Kallikkattu Ithihasam*

R. Vairamuthu

Chapter-7

Very few beget children while others carry their burden for months and produce issues.

Issues compounded in Peythevar's life increasingly ever since Chinnu's birth. He was born at the time when there was a dearth of money and when Azhagammal was bereft of breast milk. Even as a child Chinnu was different; he cried whenever someone carried him; he was obstinate like an incessant downpour. No sooner did he woke up, than little Chinnu demanded glazed sugar candies from Theni market, which he sucked lying in bed and dozed off again.

There was a vow to tonsure his head and pierce his ears at Kuchanur temple when he was five. Great enthusiasm was evident all around in response to the invitation seeking the presence of relatives for this event. The big group that had arrived in a cart had brought rice, salt, tamarind, chilli and a drum filled with mutton. The audience was not for the tonsure of Chinnu but for the auspicious occasion of skinning the goat!

After reaching the family deity's temple and praying lighting incense and camphor, offering plantains and turmeric, which passed for the local sandal paste, the barber was beckoned but, the boy was missing. People were frantically searching for him here and there

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and Azhagammal was howling for her son. Peythevar also started searching for him funny thoughts plaguing his mind about the idiosyncrasies of this boy. That's when a voice was heard from a pipal tree—"I am going to die falling into the pond." There, Chinnu hung to the tree like a bat threatening to die if he was tonsured.

The fear with which he was hugging the tree never indicated that he would jump down. Even in the event of his jumping, the water in the pond was not sufficient enough to drown him. He was brought down with the utmost care, with one person standing in the pond and another climbing up the tree.

The crowd that came to devour the meat said with appreciation: "The son of Peythevar is saved, thanks to the power of the Almighty."

* * *

As he was growing, the problems also grew. He was around ten or eleven. It was a time when he played with the local boys during the moonlit nights. The boys used to bring food items from their respective houses and share it with everyone. One boy brought coconut, the other sesame, another rice and the next, tapioca and so on, as each could. One night, the moon was bathing the village with its milky luminescence. Incandescent gold lay among the neem leaves.

The group assembled. Each one opened the parcels. Chinnu had brought half-a-gunny-bagful of groundnuts. They all ate the groundnuts, frying them on a mud stove, heating the mud all night long.

The next morning, there was a big mayhem in the house of Peythevar. Groundnuts that had been collected over a week were missing.

When Peythevar was shouting from the top of the town about the missing groundnuts, Chinnu and his mates were in the pond suffering from serious bouts of gastrointestinal disturbances failing to bid an easy farewell to the intestinal refuse.

* * *

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Chinnu was bedridden with fever after he was engaged in a game of finding the coins from the well by diving deep into it. The cough had started its race after the fever. He coughed, coughed and coughed persistently. He coughed tearing his vocal chords. He coughed without sleep and without letting anyone sleep. The cough was never brought under control despite the intake of a concoction of a wide variety of country herbs like dry ginger, pepper, chilli, jaggery, country fowl and crab essence. The boy who was like a mortar had been reduced to a pestle as nothing was retained in his stomach. A *nadar* who came to procure cotton at Kallipatti suggested a remedy. "Give him roasted fox hide mixed in honey. The cough would never come back in his lifetime."

Peythevar began the search for fox hide that day. He searched for it all over and obtained something, which was believed to be fox hide and later turned out to be dog skin. He then chased the person who cheated him in the market and hit him. He took the help of a gypsy group to fetch the fox hide, got it, roasted it and mixed it with honey in a betel leaf and finally the cough left the bay.

* * *

Chinnu did not like his school. He did not have the right kind of friends. There was also a report of him changing his brand of beedi. If he remained this way, he would not even be of use to herd cattle. Peythevar was worried about his offspring as to whether he was a boon or a bane. He got ready to take his son with him to the farming field.

Peythevar had some dry land in addition to his farming lands. A little less than an acre. There was a well, which was like a perennial spring for the entire generation of Peythevar's family. Tomatoes, brinjal, chilli and tapioca were grown there. Chinnu was initiated into agriculture there. He handed him the spade on an auspicious day after prayers. Chinnu was asked to plough the land along with a few farmers. But Chinnu kept retreating.

Peythevar had planted two coconut saplings near the wall when a farmer said, while ploughing, "You have planted the saplings too far away."

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Peythevar, ploughing the land, spoke in a tone harmonious with his spade. "Hey, am I a yokel? There is a rule for planting each and every plant. When paddy is planted, the space in between them should be enough for crabs to crawl; a fox in between two sugar canes, a cart in between two plantains; a chariot in between two coconut saplings."

Peythevar sang,

"Paddy amidst crawling crabs
Sugarcane amidst running fox
Plantain amidst running carts
Coconut amidst running chariot"

And without raising his head, not turning to Chinnu's side, he asked Chinnu to repeat

"Paddy amidst crawling crabs
Sugarcane amidst running fox"

Chinnu just waiting for an excuse ran away from the field throwing the spade away.

Chinnu came to the field only when he could not withstand the ordeal of dull, prosaic repetitions from his teacher. Realizing that the same may continue here also, he sprinted off from the field without looking back.

* * *

When Chinnu reached the stage of adolescence with his underpants peeping from his dhoti, his behaviour became very alien and strange. He bought face powder, selling cotton. He broke open the house, selling whatever that he could lay his hands on and spent the money thus earned. His extravagant habit of eating out in local restaurants had begun.

One day Peythevar was watering his field alone as his helping hand Azhagammal was down with arthritic pain. Water was flowing across the brinjal plants. Chinnu came and sat at the watering mound

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with a worried expression on his face. Seeing him like this, Peythevar was wondering if everything was fine with him as Chinnu is a rare visitor to the fields. Thinking on these lines, he asked him, "Why are you sitting like a sick fowl with your head down?"

He did not beat around the bush, did not mince words, and did not feel embarrassed. With a stoic expression, picking his teeth with a grass blade, he said, "Get me married."

The scar from the widowhood of Chellathayee itself had not healed and something new was coming up now. Peythevar was shocked thinking as to what had happened to his son.

* * *

They had gone to see the bride for Chinnu. Kaakivaadampatti can be reached after walking for three miles from Kadamali. If houses with doors, houses bereft of them and houses with no necessity of doors could be counted, the village had around fifty houses. When Peythevar's group reached Kaakivaadampatti limits and made formal enquiries about the house of Kalluvathevar, an old man who was relieving himself off in a nearby bush volunteered to come along with them to show the house.

After crossing the slushy lanes, crossing the front foyer without antagonizing the cattle, managing not to slip on the cow dung, they forged ahead. Kaluvathevar came out to welcome them, trying to get himself into a shirt and hitting his body on the door-frame in the process. After the customary talks about the rain and crops had subsided, the focus shifted to the bride. That's when she came, pouring coffee from the jug into two cups and offering it to the people present and cleaning the same cups again and again for serving to those who remained. Chinnu looked at her slyly and pinched the village elder beside him and said, " I like the girl". The village elder whispered in his ears, "Hey, she is the second wife of Kaluvathevar and the step-mother of the bride. Wait patiently and the bride would make her entry."

Kaluvathevar told a lot of lies, just short of one thousand, about the face of the bride being perfect and her's being a young body like a plantain stem, and eventually, got her married to Chinnu.

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Chinnu's domestic life was not good. He was not interested in other aspects of domestic life except the ones at night. He could not come to terms with the fact that a marriage involves satisfaction of the mind, body and the stomach of another individual also. He was a moron, who did not know how to handle a delicate young girl. Kaluvayee, the young girl who was Chinnu's wife, got stifled just like a jasmine ball stuffed within a basket of filth. Unable to bear the turmoil, she ran away to Kaakkivaadanpatti on the fifth day after the wedding itself.

The elders tried to patch up the rupture but when was a broken mud pot stuck together again?

He became a prodigal. Refused to go along with the village. Wanted to lead his life as he wished. Wanted to earn money without working for it. And, finally started peddling drugs.

That's when Peythevar broke down. He advised Chinnu that hard work only would help. Chinnu never paid any heed to his advise. With bad company to back him, he started troubling his father to partition the property and leave to him his share. Though he had tolerated all his misadventures by advising him sometimes, by forgiving at other times and sometimes by even punishing him occasionally, he was totally shattered when he heard that Chinnu was involved in peddling illicit arrack.

Translated from Tamil by Jyothsna Bhavanishankar

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Authorspeak:
Utpala Satyanarayanacharya

This question is not important for me, as to which form of poetic composition is better—metrical verse or free verse. I do not want to comment as to which one is important or not. I only wish to say most humbly that I compose in metre, as the verse form is compatible with my heartbeat.

I feel that the use of simple diction for expressing deeply-felt emotions will reduce its depth. Only appropriate, meaningful and contextual words should be chosen from among words with different shades of meaning. In my opinion, words have not only meaning, but also colour and taste. Words have some weight also; splendour is also there.

It is a misapprehension that the radiance of modern life cannot be expressed in an ancient metre. Poetry never grows old. Catching on the zest of a new life, poetry gets a new form.

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From the Award-winning Book *Sri Krishna Chandrodayamu*

Utpala Satyanarayanacharya

Sri Krishna Chandrodayamu by Utpala Satyanarayanacharya is an epic poem with an undercurrent of spiritualism trying to interpret alluringly the true nature of Krishna. Written in classical style with four Ashwasas or Cantos the story evolves from Sri Krishna's birth in prison, his arrival in Gokula, the abounding happiness that prevails and visits of the high and mighty and the baby girl Radha brought in by her parents. The epic concludes saying that this wonderful world is only the extension of the interplay of adorable Radha and Sri Krishna.

Here are a few excerpts from the Third Canto where Lord Shiva Himself comes to Nanda's house to see the divine child.

The Divine Bliss

Uttering, Narayana, Narayana, Narayana,
Stood in front of Nanda's house
A person with braided hair,
A great yogi,
Looking like Lord Shiva Himself.

O, ho, the fortunate one,
Yashoda, the wife of Nanda,

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Please give me alms.
Hearing the word, alms,
Yashoda lifted from her lap
the little one with lotus eyes.
Placing him in the comfort of a cradle,
she thought how hungry that person would be
the one asking for alms
so early in the morning.
She carried a bowl of rice
and other eatables to the door.

* * *

O Revered One,
here, accept this,
and bless our child.
O, Siddha Purusha,
on your arrival
our entire Gokula is blessed.

The mendicant said,
oh, why do I need this food!
Let me see your dear son's face
that will end all evil,
and my happiness will multiply.

* * *

I heard sages praising
the greatness of your son
so I hastened
to see your little one
won't you show him to me?
Is not seeing better than hearing,
and touching better than seeing
does it not bless a being?

* * *

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Once, a fortunate one
found in a turbulent sea
a child lying on a banyan leaf.
I would like to see that sight
as you cradle your baby
in your loving arms.

* * *

Surprised, Yashoda
looked at the mendicant,
the one longing to see her son.

* * *

O Revered Sir!
our Shyam, a little baby,
cries the whole day
sighting a stranger
Should you think this food isn't enough
I shall be happy to bring a lot more
bless the child
let him be free from all the evil.

* * *

You are forever the mother
of the Lord of the Universe
Krishna is forever your son
O personification of love, Mother,
Here I fold my hands in reverence.

Love is Krishna, Krishna is love
love is the form of God
What can one say of the one filled with love
it can only be felt as it defies all words.

* * *

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Sir, I am not a learned one
You, perhaps, came here by mistake
I don't know about whom you heard
these wonderful things in Mathura

Salutations to you,
I shall be happy to fill
your bag with grains
Please don't ask me to bring
my child here before you
At Gokula we faced many a calamity
the other day Pootana came
I shudder even to think of that.

The mendicant said
Don't fear Mother! I am not
such a demon.
I love Sri Hari
I wander on the Silver Mountain
I am a harbinger of good
Don't go by my looks
the long travel did this to me.
I teach a group of sages
in Kashikapuri
under the shade of a banyan tree
with so much love and care.

Seeing my eyes, my braids, my throat
The cloth I wear and the way I wear it
The world calls me by many names
Mother! I am known as Narayanapriya

* * *

Mother, my salutations to you,
may you be blessed in everyway,
Let me see your son once
the one precious to me as my own life.

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If you don't let me have that fortune
I shall stand like this in front of your house
and continue to beg for any number of years.

* * *

At last the son of Nanda was brought
Two anklets adorned two little feet
A string of tinkling bells around his waist
Hands were decked with golden bracelets
The shining pearl string adorned his neck
On his chest glowed a tiger's claw
The arms had bright armlets tight
Collyrium lined the lotus eyes
While a smile played on tender lips
thick locks danced on his beautiful face
A beauty spot on the chin was in place
decked with a peacock feather
Krishna shone in yellow silk.

The mendicant held the baby in his arms,
the protector of three worlds
is protected by Yashoda, he said.
As I see the lotus eyed-one
with a cherubic smile on his lips
all the three eyes of mine
are blessed by this sight, my mother.

Translated from Telugu by J. Bhagyalakshmi

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From the Award-winning Book *Bad-e-Saba Ka Intizar*

Syed Muhammad Ashraf

Waiting for the Morning Breeze

The doctor entered the city.

On both sides of the road extended a series of raised spacious platforms which stretched to the old-fashioned brick building that was painted in white lime. Wares of all sorts had been arranged on these platforms so that a passerby could judge their prices easily. The vendors who sat alert at their stalls were of different races and skin colour. The series of raised platforms didn't actually end as it met the building; rather, it extended similarly on the other side of the building for a considerable distance.

The raised platforms on the other side wore the same marketplace look. Full bodied men roamed the streets with waterskins on their shoulders. They were sprinkling water here and there and producing a clattering sound with the drinking bowls in their hands. The buyers wore different costumes varying in colours which gave evidence of their belonging to different races and groups. They roamed from one raised platform to another. The air in the street was ringing with different kinds of sweet, soft, rough, harsh, uncouth, cracked, sad and joyful voices.

The walls of the white old-fashioned brick building were not insurmountably high; here and there, these walls had small open spaces as well as skylights. The mysterious resonant voices crying *hu-haq* were clearly audible in the bazaar. Listening to those voices

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standing in the bazaar it seemed as if the voices had bodies. On these bodies grew long white satiny beards and long curly tresses which hung playfully below the ears. Listening to those voices was as soothing as wholeheartedly drinking the fragnant cool water of a cool earthen jug after a long journey on foot on a hot summer's day. This low-walled seraphic building was surrounded on all sides by pillars, domed structures, towers and huge gates which suggested the presence of a palace. No one probably ever tried, and even if they did it was perhaps next to impossible, to discern whether the bazaar really surrounded the white building. It could also have been a part of the outer wing of the building or it was possible that both of these were indivisible parts of the building with the towers and pillars. The three of them were continuous and conjoined to each other like the basic sketches of a single plan outline. Sharp high-pitched sounds would emanate from the palatial building at short intervals. For a moment the sounds of *hu-haq* as well as the colourful din of the bazaar would be drowned in them.

Occasionally, these intervals would become prolonged. Then suddenly sometimes the voices of the bazaar too would rise, initially like low murmurings, but soon growing into a continuous tinkle as many voices mingled. These sounds would then be joined by the serene, curly-tressed voices of the white building and drown all the sounds coming from the palace.

The doctor adjusted his sacred thread and felt the stethoscope round his neck reassuringly before he entered the elevated rectangular room, his briefcase clasped firmly in his hand. This room was situated right at the centre of the city and its buildings. In one brief frozen moment he acquainted himself with the cool and mournfully silent air about the room. It is also possible that he felt intimidated by the breathtaking beauty of the room. In the middle of the room lay a beautiful four-poster bed the black anterior of which was decorated with intricate carving.

On the four-poster was spread a set of expensive-looking bedsheets and duvet on which reclined that frame. She was a tall woman, extremely beautiful and radiant. She had golden hair like Turkish women have, which gave no clue about her age. Her forehead was clear and she had a long and shapely nose. Her kohl-lined eyes were half-open. Despite her illness, her cheeks and lips were a rosy pink. Her lips too were half-open and her pearly white teeth gleamed

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like stars as she breathed in and out. Fine bluish veins glimmered through the clear skin of her neck. The area of concealment below her neck was elevated into a shapely cone. Her silvery hands lay bordering the well-shaped mounds of her buttocks. On a close look at her hands and feet the doctor noticed that the woman's well-rounded hands and feet showed signs of being accustomed to hard work, though efforts had been made to keep them soft and clean. The patient's breathing was irregular. For many moments at a stretch her body would lie still only to resume her irregular breathing with a sudden convulsive jerk.

Standing against the bedstead was a tall man whose head was covered in a four-pointed cap. On his glowing pink, aged countenance grew a beautiful yet disorderly beard. Shadows of power and beauty seemed to flit across his eyes intermittently. His personality made one feel sometimes that he was a king and at other times a fakir. The doctor stood with his head bowed at the side of the bed facing the man.

The doctor looked at the patient for some time. The man had his unblinking and worried gaze on the patient. All of a sudden the doctor realized that the huge rectangular room was surrounded on all sides by several rooms. These rooms had curtains to them from behind which the clink of bangles, soft mournful whisperings and suppressed sighs were heard. From some of the rooms the noisy cries of young children rose. Whenever the pitch of these noises crossed a certain level, the tall man's forehead would crease into a frown. The doctor felt that the whisperings from behind the curtains were comprehensible but did not have to do with any single language.

After a slight pause the doctor wondered about the relationship of the man with the patient so that he could find out more about the nature of the disease.

"What is she to you?"

"She is an *aziza*."

"Sorry?"

"*Aziza* means one who is most respected, and most dear too."

"How is she related to you?"

"I am her worldly lord and master."

While the tall man seemed to use a pompous literary diction the doctor's speech reminded one of the Hindi of radio and T.V. broadcasts.

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The doctor stared at him like a dimwit. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Being a doctor, I should like to know the problem the patient is suffering from. In order to understand the disease, it is essential that I ask about your relationship with the patient. I fail to understand clearly the relationship that you are talking about."

The tall man gave a weak smile.

"Do ask, I'll tell you all that is within the realm of my knowledge."

It was evident from the expression on the doctor's face that though he hadn't grasped the full purport of this sentence, he was satisfied that this person knew a great deal, if not everything, about the patient.

"Since when has she been like this?"

'For a very long time now."

There was a long silence after this. The silence began to get even deeper when the whisperings, in an alien tongue though they were, could be heard clearly now and their volume began to mount in the adjoining room.

The tall man saw the doctor's apparent confusion and attempted to elaborate his meaning this time.

" *Aziza*....I mean the patient, hasn't eaten anything in ages now. Home-made medicines prepared according to local prescriptions manage to touch her lips but do not reach her stomach. The patient never talks about her illness. Sometimes her skin grows red due to high temperature. But within a short while it grows moist and ice cold against the palm of your hand. All symptoms of life seem to start ebbing out. The main cause of our anxiety is her irregular inhalation-exhalation."

"Irregular what?"

"I mean her breathing."

The doctor took a deep breath and asked with hesitation, "Can I examine the patient with a stethoscope?"

"Of course. *Aziza* has never been an observer of purdah."

The patient's breathing was comparatively regular at that time. The doctor removed the gold-worked dupatta deferentially from her bosom. He placed the diaphragm of the stethoscope there and listened carefully. His pupils dilated in amazement. He removed the stethoscope quickly and tried to take in even the minutest of sounds coming

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from all the nooks and corners of the room. There was no sound in the room except the sound of breathing. He adjusted the stethoscope once more. His expression changed to amazement again. With the diaphragm on her chest, he continued to listen for a long time with his eyes closed. The patient's face showed contentment as long as the diaphragm rested on her chest. The doctor removed the instrument and spoke anxiously.

"The patient's heart is in good condition. There doesn't seem to be any symptom of any disease."

The tall man didn't show any surprise.

"Doesn't this seem at all odd to you?"

"No."

The tall man's reply was brief and contrary to the doctor's expectation. Still, he contained himself and spoke with emphasis.

"You'll be shocked out of your wits when you hear what I have to tell you. The patient's heart is sending forth waves of music. I've clearly heard it."

The tall man smiled with dignity as he nodded his head softly in agreement.

The tall man's placid reaction surprised the doctor, but he continued to speak.

"The tune arising from the rhythm of the heartbeat had the musical gurgle of a flowing river. It had the enchanting whisperings of the breeze and the lively twitter of birds in it...."

The tall man signalled for him to stop. The doctor felt that the tall man was lost in the remembrance of some former incident. He began to speak.

"The sound would also reverberate like the first stroke on the drum in a battlefield. The tender ecstatic sound of two lovers' bodies meeting for the first time and experiencing each other with their lips must also be there. There would also be echoes of the intoxicated cries of the Sufis in sandal-saffron coloured robes; the cruel resounding voice of the king passing a death decree in open court; the clink of the chains which take shape on the signs of the spring's impending arrival and the musical pitter-patter of the first raindrop of the season on the barren land. And the sitar and the tabla...." He fell silent.

"Yes. The sounds are something of the sort that you describe

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but it is very difficult to give them a verbal form," the doctor said.

Suddenly a young boy emerged from the adjoining room. "They're inquiring from 'within' to know the doctor's diagnosis of the lady's condition," he said.

No sooner did the boy's voice reach the patient's ears, than her face changed colour and her breathing became suddenly irregular. The tall man's face clouded with displeasure.

"Go back in, I say. Don't you dare come in here without permission!"

The young boy gave him a surprised look and went back inside.

The doctor's fingers combed through the patient's golden hair so as to place his palm on the skull.

"The fever is rising," he muttered. Moistening his palm with the drops of prespiration on her forehead, he took his hand to her eyes. Gently, with the soft fleshy side of his thumb he pulled down her lower eyelid. The whites of her eyes glimmered. Feeling for the warmth of her face with the back of his hands, he mumbled, "The body is cooling."

Shadows of worry shivered across the tall man's face. He spoke in a near whisper, "The actual disease concerns her respiration."

The doctor looked at him and pondered a while. Then he fixed his gaze on the rise and fall of the patient's bosom. He began intently to study her irregular breathing....then he stood up straight and spoke with great conviction.

"There's vitality in the sick one's whole body. The problem is just that of the breath. And that is the biggest problem. There's no cure when the lungs go bad."

"Are you totally full of certitude and conviction that the respiratory organs are now entirely dysfunctional?" He asked the doctor in what he thought was his simplest diction.

The doctor applied the stethoscope to the lungs for the first time now and made a prolonged examination. At length, he spoke:

"Amazing, really amazing. The lungs are in perfect shape, and yet are unable to function as they should."

"What does full respiration have to do with the strength and power of other body-parts?" The tall man asked.

"A lot," said the doctor. "When fresh air commingles with the sanguinous element through the respiratory organ, then and only

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then the sweet form of life takes its shape. Becoming one with the vital elan, it gives power and energy to all parts of the bodily estate. Were the right amount of air not available to the sanguinous element, then the blood, the red blood turns blue within no time, and disease spreads over the whole body."

"You imagine that the respiratory organs are performing perfectly well. And yet there is lack of fresh air in the body?"

"The body lacks fresh air because this room lacks fresh air," the doctor responded with confidence. "It is this which mixes with blood to impart strength to all parts of the body. If the right amount of air is not available to the blood it turns blue and disease spreads throughout the body."

"You believe that the organs of respiration are performing perfectly well. Then why is it that the body lacks fresh air?"

"The body lacks fresh air because there is no fresh air in this room," repeated the doctor steadily.

"The doors of the rest of the rooms which open into this room are open, and these rooms have innumerable windows to the outside." The tall man gave a detailed reply.

"But I don't feel any fresh air coming in from any window."

All of a sudden the door of one of the adjoining rooms opened and a little girl entered wearing a frock-skirt. "Mama wants to know if the lady's fever is down or not?"

The patient's body writhed for a moment and the breathing became irregular once more.

"Get away from my sight, you wretch!" The tall man spoke in low tones through grinding teeth. He was in a frenzy.

"Why do you get angry? Mama is sending me from within to ask about her condition. Where am I making a mistake?" The girl whose diction was odd remonstrated, puffing her nostrils.

The girl's words, accent and voice seemed to have driven the man crazy with rage. The doctor calmed him with difficulty. He signalled to the girl to leave the room.

Then the doctor spoke: "I have only one remedy. For this kind of a patient any doctor would prescribe nothing but this medicine. The fine blood vessels of the lungs can be inflated by administering this medicine so that fresh air pervades them better. But...."

"Then what's stopping you?" The tall man asked impatiently.

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"But this treatment is effective only when the patient has access to fresh air. Only then will the air be able to pervade the inflated vessels of the lungs. When fresh air itself is not available then what's the use of inflating the blood vessels?"

"So?" the tall man asked worriedly.

"There is no way out," the doctor said resignedly. After a short silence he spoke once more. "Can't we change the patient's room?" he asked.

"No. This room is exclusive to *aziza*. She has spent a lifetime here. Couched in the centre of all the buildings outside, this room cannot become anyone's but *aziza's*."

"But surely you can arrange another room for the patient in addition to this one?"

"The rest of the rooms are exclusive to different individuals."

"But how did the patient manage to survive without fresh air for so long?"

"The problem of fresh air is not such an old one. All around this room are rooms of those who are attached to the patient. These rooms have windows, ventilators and doors but these people don't open them."

"Don't these people have to come out of their rooms to meet others?"

"No; for this purpose these people have created internal approaches through the walls for convenience."

"Then it is all the more amazing that the patient has managed to survive. Breathing this stale air day and night is very difficult."

"No, actually in one of these rooms late in the evening a door opens to the outside and a wave of fresh air surges in. May be it is this which is responsible for her survival. Otherwise too *aziza* is of a hardy constitution." Said the good-looking, dignified man as he looked lovingly at the woman who lay on the bedstead.

The doctor thought for a while before he spoke.

"I've never seen such a patient before. Can you tell me if she has any other relations? One can also inherit illness."

"*Aziza* has many sisters. One of them is very old. She doesn't live in this house, in fact, not even in this country. She is as hale and hearty as a youngster. Even in a alien land people look up to her and she is well-respected."

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"Oh?"

"Another sister who is slightly older to the patient also stays abroad. She is happily settled in her country. Destiny seems to have placed all possible luxuries and pleasures at her disposal. One of the sisters lives in this country. Her acquaintances would have liked *aziza* too to adopt the same lifestyle as hers. But the near and dear ones of the patient did not allow this.

"That sister—is there a flaw in her character"? asked the doctor arranging the stethoscope round his neck.

"No, there is no flaw but if *aziza* had adopted the former's lifestyle she would have lost her balance."

Something suddenly struck the tall man and he began to talk in a slightly excited tone. "Among *aziza's* elders there is an old lady. Her family members respect her a lot but they never allow her to go out of the house. It was heard that the strong old lady has grown weak now due to her imprisonment. Her relatives greet her respectfully enough yet none of them would care to spend some time with her."

All of a sudden from behind one of the curtains there was a voice asking for some *dal-bhat*. It was a sweet feminine voice. After some time the same voice started narrating the tales of Ram, Sita, Lanka and Hanuman.

The doctor looked at the tall man in amazement. The tall man said with a smile.

"This is another close relative of *aziza* who has come to sick-visit her."

"The voice which was talking about *makhan chor* a short while ago?"

The man sensed the doctor's state of mind and spoke brightly. "It is in the nature of some things to be shrouded in mystery. And may be, even if I unveil the mystery you will not be able to comprehend fully."

Both maintained a silence for some time. The doctor spoke first.

"All I want to know is, when the gust of fresh air comes into this room, what change does it bring about in the patient's condition?"

"You can see for yourself late in the evening."

"It's going to be some time before that."

Both became silent once more. The doctor felt that except

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this man no one really cared much about the lady's prospects of survival. He hadn't had a look at the women who had been enquiring about the patient's condition. But he had a feeling that the patient's condition evoked only as much interest in them as an unpredictable change of weather would. He wasn't able to determine the status of this man with forbidding aspect among these people. What is his relationship with the other inhabitants of this building and what connection does he have with the population spread outside? His mind was teeming with questions. But he wanted to avoid asking too many because of the grave demeanour of the man and the precariousness of the situation. He tried to make the question sound casual.

"To whom does the property that lies outside belong?"

"Have you come here for the first time?"

"Yes, I used to observe it from a distance—this whole habitation seemed so good from far. Viewed from a distance, the tall buildings, their strength and power, their antiquity—all this tugged at my heart. I saw the bazaar at close quarters today. Colourful objects, dresses of different types and designs, people of diverse races—and then the voices of the fakirs and holy men calling out *hu-haq* all the time. I couldn't see much of it, but it gave my heart a lot of peace, that building outside, made of antique, thin bricks. It was revealed to me that such a dwelling and shopping complex has such a centre of inner peace too."

"Come, have a few glimpses of the city. Tell me when when sundown is near; we'll then come back to the patient's side."

Opening the high darkish teak doors, they both went out. They saw many different people on the narrow corridor reserved for the servants, but none attempted to speak to them. The doctor noticed that no one actually ever tried to speak to them, but all looked upon that forbidding, handsome and well-dressed man with loving and respectful eyes. This portion of the servant-corridor faced a broad staircase. Both started to climb it. They went on, up and up, going across innumerable buildings with tall ceilings and roofs. They climbed on, until they reached the very highest rooftop. The terrace there had a gabled parapet all around, in a state of disrepair. The man took the doctor's hand and led him close to the edge of the parapet. The city lay sprawled below. Pale rays of the sun

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still lingered on the roof, but way down in the city, darkness had descended.

The doctor realized that though darkness had fallen over the city, there was still a lot of hustle and bustle and activity there. And then he also realized that grace and splendour have nothing to do with the lights: they came from the people. That high and strong building was surrounded by the bazaar on all sides and contiguous to it was the building made of antique bricks immersed in satiny darkness where he had heard the *hu-haq*-like voices.

"To whom does all this belong?" he asked, casting a glance at the city below.

The man answered gravely. "These buildings, those pillars, the balconies, those ramparts, the bazaars, these cries of *hu-haq*—all of these are my subjects. All of them have but one common link—and that is with me."

In front of the simple-looking building made of antique bricks some white shadows became visible. Their contours were a little vague because of the grubby light.

"Those people....Who are those people?" the doctor asked anxiously. The man looked at the shadows with a respectful gaze and said after a pause : " That building....and those who raise the sounds of *hu-haq*.....all of them are part of this populace. All those who go to the bazaar are also of this township. All the residents of this building too are a part of this settlement. And all of them are now reduced to being half of what they are because of the sickness of that woman patient."

"You mean.....?" The pupils of the doctor's eyes dilated in amazement.

"They all led their lives with reference to that lady. At the conscious level no one of course realized how practically useful the patient was for them. But now, ever since she fell ill and became physically faint, they find themselves somehow incomplete."

"You are talking in riddles," said the doctor in low tones. In fact he'd now begun to feel frightened, and yet the case also now seemed to be a little clearer to him than before. And when the last rays of the sun grew dim and were finally lost in the dark, the doctor, standing at the ramparts of the ample and wide rooftop of that magnificent building which stood in the midst of the sprawling

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settlement, was struck with awe, but couldn't contain his curiosity any longer.

"Who is this patient? You haven't yet told me this. You haven't yet told me anything about your relationship with the sick one." The open air of the rooftop had apparently given him some courage.

The man continued to look down the ramparts. Suddenly he spoke:

"You yourself were unable to figure out anything at all?" He looked at the doctor questioningly.

Suddenly it seemed to the doctor as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes. He recalled that when he had listened to the heartbeat of the patient he'd also heard some sounds or voices that he had heard before and which had then filled him with joy. He now gazed intently at the handsome, dignified face of the man for a long time. He then rose, with his head bowed.

"It's late evening now. Let's go down and take a look at the patient."

They both descended quickly. Immediately on entering the presence of the patient they felt that gusts of fresh air were coming in from the adjoining room. The patient was reclining on the bed, with a dignified mien propped up against pillows. Her face had gained colour, it was now tinged with a rosy hue. Noticing the doctor enter, she evinced no reaction or diffidence. Yet waves of gratitude seemed to flutter in her eyes at the sight of the man.

The man approached near and asked gently, with perfect love in his tone.

"How do you feel now?"

She smiled, but not without some effort. She let her large eyes linger on the man and said, "I get better at this time."

"The doctor says that all your vital organs are in perfect condition. All that you lack is fresh air—adequately for your breathing."

The patient sat quietly, her head bowed. Then she spoke after a long pause:

"Why should you have to get so worried?"

"You know that the breath of life in this city subsists because of me. God forbid, were you to pass, everything will gradually turn to dust and dirt."

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"Isn't it possible," interrupted the doctor, "'isn't it possible for the window of the adjoining room to be kept always open and let fresh air have access here all the time?"

"Well, in the adjoining rooms, there are young people too, just as there are other persons there. Out of all the rooms all around here, there's just one room whose resident keeps the outside-facing window open. When he returns in the evening, he throws his door open, and only then the fresh breeze gains access inside here. He wanders about the whole day in quest of his daily bread and gets home only late in the evening."

"Can't the rest of the people too open their outside-facing windows and leave their door to this room open?" This was the doctor speaking.

"It appears that they feel no concern for the lady."

"Then why should that young fellow alone have such concern?"

"For he's interested in seeing her live."

"But why?"

"For he loves his forbears."

"I can't make head or tail of this." The doctor spoke with great dejection.

"That's what I told you already. Even if I seek to tell you something, it doesn't follow that you'd understand everything." The man spoke in a sad tone.

"Is there anything at all that I can do?" the doctor seemed to have given up.

"You are the doctor. You are the best person to tell us what you can do."

Firmly, but in tones of great deference, the doctor said: "I can do no more than treat her with medicines to strengthen her lungs. But the true medicine for weak lungs is just fresh air, nothing less." Having spent so much time in the environment of that ancient place, he was now able to articulate himself in good, standard speech. He continued:

"Ask all the young men in this building to open all their out-facing windows and keep open the doors of their rooms that open into this chamber."

"And if they refuse? What.....What will happen then?" The

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patient asked in great agitation.

"Then," the doctor spoke stressing each word, "Then he'll die." He pointed to the tall, dignified man.

None could observe the looks which passed between the beautiful, sad patient and the tall, handsome man. For, the doctor had, by then, left the room quietly, his bag in his hand.

Translated from Urdu by Baran Rehman

Translator's Note: Words written in italics have been retained exactly as in the original. In the early part of the story, the tall, dignified man speaks in a bookish, Persianised idiom while the doctor speaks in an equally stilted modern Hindi radio/T.V. idiom. I have tried to represent both these registers by making the vocabulary of the two characters slightly archaic and bookish.

❑

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Barua, Bireswar (b.1933) Assamese poet, short-story writer, essayist, novelist; translates from Spanish, French, English and German into Assamese; has more than 40 works; former Civil Servant; recipient of Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad's Bajaloni Award, Asom Sahitya Sabha's Award and Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry collection, *Anek Manuh Anek Thai Aru Nirjanata*. Add: Barnachal Road, Bamunimaidan, Guwahati 781 021, Assam.

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Joseph, Sara (b.1946) Malayalam novelist, short-story writer and essayist; some of her significant works are *Papathara, Oduvilathe Sooryakanti* (short-story), *Mattathi* (novel) etc.; recipient of Cherukadu Award, Katha Award (three times), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Alahayude Penmakkal*, etc. Add: 'Geetanjali', Mulamkunnathukavu P.O., Thrissur, Kerala.

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Mukherjee, Meenakshi (b.1937) Indian English scholar, critic and academician; former Professor of English at J.N.U.; has translated poetry and novels from Bengali into English; brought out the critical edition of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first Indian novel in English; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award 2003 for her book *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. Add: 10-A, Rukmani Devi Colony Annexe, West Marredpally, Secunderabad 500 026, A.P.

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Roy, Prafulla (b.1934) Bengali novelist and short-story writer; has over 100 novels, about 150 short stories and 10 collections of children's stories and essays; two volumes of his stories and four of his novels were translated into English by John W. Hood; about 35 of his works have been made into award-winning films, tele-films and tele-serials; recipient of Bankimchandra Smriti Puraskar of the Govt. of West Bengal, Bhualka Prize of the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Motilal Prize (*Jugantar Patrika*), Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel, *Kramikal.* and B.F.J.A. Prize for Best Story. Add: 174/16, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Road, Flat –3D, Regent Park, Kolkata 700 040.

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Subba, Bindya (b.1955) Nepali novelist and short-story writer; besides, *Athah* (Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel) she has brought out two short-story collections and one translation of Jainendra Kumar's Hindi novel *Tyagapatra*; presently she is a Sister Tutor in the School of Nursing, Darjeeling; recipient of Vijayashree Puraskar, New Delhi, Diyalo Puraskar from Nepali

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Sahitya Sammelan, Darjeeling, Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Athah* etc. Add: Ropeway, P.O. North Point, Dist: Darjeeling 734 101.

Subba, Manprasad: Nepali poet; recipient of Sahitya Akademi award for his poetry collection, *Adim Busti* in 1998. Add: Agam Chowk, P.O. Bijanbari, Dist. Darjeeling, West Bengal.

Subbanna, K.V. (b.1932) One of the foremost figures in Karnataka's public life, being a theatre activist, director and writer; his works in Kannada include a collection of poems, another of plays, an adaptation of *Bhagavadajjukam*, several children's plays, books on film and several translations; recipient of Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communications, 1991; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for his book *Kavirajamarga Mattu Kannada Jagattu*. Add: Ninasam, Heggodu, Sagara 577 417, Karnataka.

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dear Reader,

This editorial must begin with a word of apology. The present issue has been inordinately delayed, partly because of human resource complications and partly due to technological glitch. One wouldn't want to indulge in excuses, lame or otherwise; one would rather depend on the indulgence of the readers. Apart from the delay, we have another admission to make. In the special pages on the Akademi-award winners in the last issue, we missed the Konkani awardee Shashank Sitaram's short-story, "Focus", but we make amends by publishing it in this issue, again banking on the readers' indulgence.

The winter season of Indian literature continues. We have lost three stalwarts, two of whom were Fellows of the Akademi—Mulk Raj Anand, Satchi Rautray—and Arun Kolatkar. We open this issue paying tributes to these three masters of Indian literature.

The piece on Mulk Raj Anand has been written by Suresh Kohli who used to know him very closely and also has made a documentary film on his life and works. Expectedly therefore it is an *in memoriam* proper containing a lot of intimate references. The one on Satchi Rautray is by Debdas Chhotray, a fellow poet, contemporary but much junior, who also knew him reasonably well. His write-up, though partly reminiscent, is mostly evaluative. The Arun Kolatkar article is by Arundhati Subramaniam, a young Indian English poet from Kolatkar's Mumbai, but who hardly knew him personally. Hers is a comprehensive response to the powerful poet's impact on the younger generation. This article may be read along with the very sensitive reviews of Kolatkar's two latest poetry-collections *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Satra*, by Rizio Raj, another young poet writing in English. The readers may like to know that this review-article was received at my desk a few days before the poet's death.

Born and brought up in a tea garden of Assam, I had a particular bonding with Mulk Raj Anand after reading his *Two Leaves and a Bud*, first in Bengali translation (*Duti Pata Ekti Kunri*) in late school days and then in the original English during early college life. It is arguable that *Untouchable* or *Coolie* may be better novels than *Two Leaves and a Bud*, but it created a

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deep impact on my mind as I identified with many of the situations depicted in the novel and emphathised with many of the characters. The exploitation of the tea-garden labourers, deprivation of their children, their drowning of the agony in cheap liquor, the European Assistant Manager compelling the better-looking labour-women to voluntary rape—all these were within the ambit of my direct or indirect experience during those formative years.

We are also remembering in this issue Nag Bodas, a reputed playwright in English whose play *Learn Latin, Be a Mason* which was published in *Indian Literature* (No.214, March-April 2003) evoked a lot of enthusiastic response from the readers. The touching reminiscence of his daughter which we publish in this issue will, I am sure, touch a chord in those readers' hearts.

"If I wish to talk/to the neighbouring galaxies/how will my voice reach them/cutting through the layers/of the skies?" muses Gulzar in a new series of creative outpouring called 'Cosmos poems'. I know hardly any Urdu, but a great scholar in Urdu tells me that this is something unique in Urdu poetry. We present to our readers two sections of such poems under the title 'Universe' and 'Genesis', followed by a few miscellaneous ones, very ably and sensibly translated by J.P. Das, a reputed poet and novelist in Oriya. Let us take an example: "Mother Kaal/picked up God/and placed Him/ on a round blue planet/and said:/Impatient you;/You will grow on your own." You see, dear reader, the originality of thought as well as the felicity of translation, don't you?

If Gulzar gazes upward, we have another past master gazing at the fields and meadows, the flowers and the dews. Enjoy reading Dina Nath Nadim, arguably the greatest poet of Kashmir, in our Masters Section. We have 30 short poems under the general title "Ancedotes" depicting the subtle scenes of nature but reflecting the drama of human life, with utter economy of words. The approach is minimalist. Savour a sample: "The topmost branch of a tree/trembled in the early morning/and/saw its shadow on the ground./It looked towards the sky/but/fell in love with the earth./A wind shook the tree;/it lapped the pain". And another: "The wind lost its way/but/a whirlwind caught it/in the middle of the road./The leaves swerved/and/screamed./Satan had entered the fray./It was daytime."

With this issue we also begin to publish a series of interviews with some of the outstanding writers of India. We cover in this issue Ruskin Bond and Mahesh Dattani, one a fictionist and the other a playwright, but both writing in English. The interviews make fascinating reading, especially when Dattani narrates how his passion for classical dance coloured his theatre as well and how he observed gay people in Mumbai before writing the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. One is jolted to attention when he gives his worldview thus: "I believe that the world is what we make of it. Just as

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our actions create our Karma, each of us can contribute to the preservation and betterment of our world by creative action". With Ruskin Bond, the motto is "never despair but work on even in despair." As a message to the young aspirant writer, he quotes Red Smith, a famous journalist: "Writing is easy, all you have to do is to sit down at your typewriter until little drops of blood appear on your forehead". His reply to the question if he ever felt alien to the environment of India is worth-quoting again and again: "Not here in India but when I went outside India, especially to England after leaving school in the early 1950, I felt a bit alien there, to that environment, particularly when I went to Jersey to live with my relatives and felt out of touch with India". This is perhaps what they call the magic of India, the continent of Circe!

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

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Mulk Raj Anand: A Tribute
(1905-2004)

Suresh Kohli

He was, indeed, first amongst equals. He started it all. This triumphant journey of the Indian English novel into the western dawn. Working as a part-time proof-corrector in the Hogarth Press — while studying Philosophy in London — provided him an access to Virginia Woolf's drawing room in Tavistock Square, and thus into the charmed Bloomsbury circle in the late twenties of the last century. A taunt by Edward S West, about his writing about an outcaste led him to Ireland (where he met W B Yeats, and poet a.e, (George Russel), and then to Gandhi ashram back in India to rework the novel, *Untouchable* into a simple narrative on the Mahatma's advise. Its eventual publication with a preface by E M Forster in 1936, after 19 publishers had turned it down, has since been translated into 42 languages of the world and earned the status of a Penguin Twentieth Century Classic. An honour unmatched by another Indian till date.

It was around this time, without in any way being acquainted with one another, that two other Indians – amongst the many more unknown one is reasonably certain – were also vying for a place in the English writing sun—R K Narayan and Raja Rao. Their first novels too came out shortly, though like Anand, Narayan too found a publisher courtesy an English novelist, Graham Greene. And both Greene and Forster did so for similar reasons. Though sitting in Paris, the third angle of the famous triangle, Raja Rao needed no such patronage to find a publisher for *Kanthapura*. These works by young Indians transported them into a different world. And paved way for the success of subsequent generations of the Indian English novelist. The eventual success of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy should not be mistaken as the advent of the Empire writing back.

My relationship with Mulk Raj Anand began on a sour note. One's opinion of him wasn't much different from that of some others —

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academics, critics, and fellow-writers — one would interact with in those heady days when writing for newspapers was fun. And the opinion was, one realized subsequently, and rather bitterly, based on a limited reading of his work, and an over-exposure to an overbearing man at literary and other meets. The private, recluse R K Narayan had always been the first choice, and perhaps will continue to be for a while longer, though unlike Mulk Raj Anand, his oeuvre had been limited and critical response more positive and pronounced. The same, to a certain extent, applies to Raja Rao whose output, in any case, has been limited in comparison.

The sour note was the fallout of a book review I did for *The Hindustan Times* that led to a long, unsavory controversy because the editor of *Tales from Modern India* took exception to a question about the selection. And one of those who pounced on the young reviewer without carefully applying himself to the point raised had been Mulk Raj Anand, who nursed the grudge against the young reviewer till years later. And despite having adopted him as a favourite nephew. Raja Rao, whom the young reviewer had quoted in the said review, continued to have a mild laughter during subsequent meets. And the late Bhabani Bhattacharya sent letters of appreciation from the distant USA for the bold, measured stand.

But needless to say, the differences about critical responses, and a reviewer's freedom to comment on a piece of writing — regardless of an author's standing — persisted till almost the end. He did feebly raise the point when I met him in May this year in Khandala. This was in response to a question about whether he had been continuing with his writing. And he said a big No. Saying in the same breath: "Aren't you happy?" This was, perhaps, because he always insisted on my reviewing his novels, and I kept condemning his verbosity.

I wasn't happy. I was rather bitter and disappointed. I wanted him to complete the promised confessional. I was also unhappy because I had let him down earlier on another count as well. I had neither applied myself to the task of compiling a *Mulk Raj Anand Reader* (one hopes the Sahitya Akademi, having taken up the ambitious task, redeems the promise by his next birthday) nor seriously started work on his literary biography. I agree with him and many others, now in retrospect, that having been very close to him in the decade of the nineties when I started shooting my ambitious documentary on him independent of a sponsor (an idea he did not appreciate to begin with as he did not want me to invest my meagre savings), and recording a lot of facts about his literary growth, encounters and adventures I was in an ideal position to work on the book. But I was wrong like him. Thinking there will be time for it later. But time lost is never regained.

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But as one got to know him better, and re-read some of his works, the initial skepticism turned into admiration. Three things struck. His honesty, sincerity and humility. Anything he took on he jumped into it with total commitment. That's why he became a political activist, a social crusader as the situations demanded. Uncle Mulk was a 'truly the only' Indian renaissance man after Rabindranath Tagore, a multifaceted achiever he held in great esteem, and, perhaps, unconsciously tried to emulate. And achieved distinction in almost every discipline he put his hands into. That's why he was the only one who was elected Fellow of all the three Akademies, Sahitya, Lalit Kala, and Sangeet Natak. His cultural rediscovery of India and Asia through the 136-volumes of *Marg* that he founded in 1948 and edited till the early eighties is by itself an achievement that will immortalize him. Without doubt. The fact that even his detractors accepted this exceptional work speaks volumes about the man's commitment.

Beginning with *Untouchable* in 1935, Mulk Raj Anand published another two dozen novels and ten collections of short stories till his death (he died a lonely man in his estate, though interaction with like-and-dislike-minded people had been his lifeline) on the eve of his 99th birthday on 28 September 2004 (not many are aware that the novel, stemming out of a personal childhood experience, had been originally conceived as a play). Someone will have to rise to the occasion, and resurrect the two incomplete volumes of the promised seven fictional autobiographical accounts. The story of the naive poet Krishan Chander Azad that began with *Seven Summers* and runs like a river through *Morning Face, Confessions of a Lover, The Bubble, Pilpili Saheb, Caliban and Gandhi, Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi, Nine Moods of Bharata* (these actually form the fifth volume in the series of the confessional novel).

He himself learnt the mudras to comment on dance. He was himself an amateur painter. Not only his *Two Leaves and a Bud* was amongst the first Indian English novels to be adapted for the Hindi screen, he himself made a touching short multi-award-winner film out of his famous story *The Lost Child*. He was amongst the founding-fathers of the Progressive Writers Movement, the manifesto of which was co-authored by him in London) after the Second World War in which he was himself a participant together with George Orwell, and others. He was the lone Indian who managed a breakthrough into Virginia Woolf's coveted circle of Bloomsbury writers because he happened to work as a proof-reader in the Woolfs' Hogarth Press. Many of these conversations with literary giants like T S Eliot, D H Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, E M Forster, Bonamy Dobree, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Edith Sitwell, Herbert Read had been recorded in the 1980 publication, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*. He eventually had to borrow my copy

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of the book, in which he made corrections in his own handwriting, when Oxford University Press wanted to reissue it some years ago. While I never got the promised copy of the new edition from OUP, the original is now a proud possession. And had it, perhaps, not for the purposes of this tribute, I wouldn't have noticed these corrections.

Mulk Raj Anand advocated freedom, and fought oppression of any kind: social, artistic or political. He was not only a witness to the turbulent twentieth century, but a product, a participant in it as well. His novels speak about human predicament. Despite his strong principled stands against oppression at heart he remained "a naive poet who refuses to become sophisticated, to whom the smiles and tears and laughter of children are as valid as the self-will of Kant." Talking about his work, he once observed: "The substance of my work is the whole of my varied experience, the theme of my work became the whole man and the whole gamut of human relationships, rather than only a single part of it." And elsewhere: "The whole urge of my writing came from love of art as an illuminating factor in human experience and of poetry as a medium through which one can think humanly." He also said that while a writer must try to become an instrument of social change, his intent should be "not to write epics, but to live them." Therefore, the range of realism in his fiction is unlimited, whether telling the story of a coolie, or a prince, which makes *Private Life of an Indian Prince* an important social document.

Born on 12 December 1905 in Peshawar, Mulk Raj Anand graduated from Khalsa College, Amritsar, and then sailed for England in *S S Victoria*, an Italian boat, with letters of recommendations from Sir Mohammed Iqbal whose *Israr-e-Khudi* ('Secrets of the Self') was to be his window to the world. Going to England was also, in a way, an escape from his father Lal Chand's tyranny the latter had beat up his mother, Ishwar Kaur; for hiding the truth of his being jailed for participation in an Amritsar bandh because he had fixed a job for Mulk in the army through King's Commission. A Fellowship enabled him to research in Philosophy under G Dawes Hicks. In London, Mulk fell in love fairly frequently, and married theatre actress Kathleen Van Gelder. A daughter was born soon after. Her infidelity disillusioned him, and on the rebound during a visit to Bombay he fell in love with Anil de Silva who gave him the idea for the formation of Modern Architects and Artists' Research Group (MARG). He undertook a hurried trip to get a divorce from Kathleen but the waiting period proved fatal and de Silva decided to marry a Frenchman. Next in line was a Greek dancer. He eventually married Shirin Vajifdar, one of the three dancing sisters in Bombay to whom he remained officially married till death did them apart.

Uncle Mulk had begun to get disillusioned with an India which was

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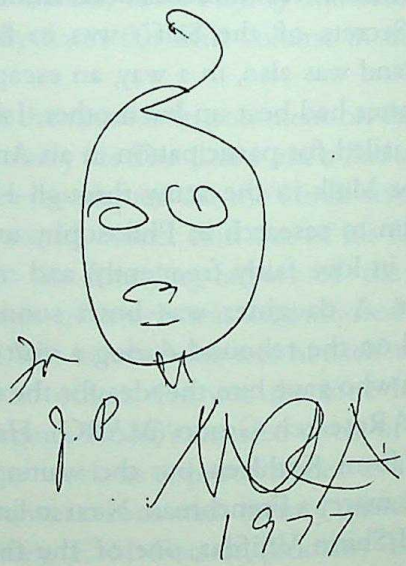
not in consonance with Nehru's ideals and beliefs. He blended Gandhian philosophy, and Nehruvian thoughts to create a worldview of his own. That's probably why in later years he not only found solace in Khandala hills in Maharashtra, but also satisfaction in working for the depressed and the downtrodden for whom he adopted a village, complete with a school and a dispensary which was funded by Sarvodaya Trust to which he bequeathed all that he possessed in the mortal world. On hindsight his moving away from the glare of public life was a precursor for a quiet exit from the disillusionment that the India of his dreams had come to mean. Uncle Mulk will be missed for his fiery presence more and more in times to come.

Talking about *Seven Summers,* the first in the series of the semi-autobiographical which Anand had sought to define as a confessional narrative, the beginning of which had been made after an escapade with first love Irene, at Mount Snowdon in the late twenties, K N Sinha (one of his earliest academic admirers) described it as "a novel of intense feeling. Here, Anand dramatizes his own consciousness through the first seven years of his life and presents a soul-searching diary of the real, intimate life known to himself... (Its excellence lies in the personal intensity, in the purity and immediacy with which the author records his experiences, dimmed by the passage of time." And it was this intensity, this immediacy which he sought to bring to all his writings.

❑



Doodle by Mulk Raj Anand
Courtesy : J.P. Das

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Season of The Cuckoo: A Memorial to Satchidanand Rautray (1916-2004)

Devdas Chhotray

Many years back, my English friend Gillian Westcott defined for me the season of the cuckoo by reciting an anonymous pastoral: "April, come she will; May, she will stay; June she will tune; July she will fly; August, die she must." It is of course a coincidence that two eminent Oriya bards, Satchidanand Rautray (SR) and Guruprasad Mohanty (GPM), two grand cuckoos flying over the uneven meadows of modern Oriya poetry, chose to die in the month of August this year. (Only poets can choose their death!) This brought to my memory the season of the cuckoo. August is past. Now there are only Septembers to remember.

Their deaths were not Lorcan, like the death of Ignacio Sa'nchez Meji'as, occurring at 'five o' clock in the afternoon. Nor did they die in the high noon of their creativity. SR was ripe at ninety, and GPM had just turned octogenarian. SR who started writing poetry in his teens, published his first book in 1932, but peaked truly in the sixties, after which there was not so much waning as spreading thin on diverse activities. GPM was virtually a one anthology poet, and if we could miniaturise, a one-poem poet. His magnum opus "Kalapursha" was published in 1960. But his signature was etched on stone. However, when it comes to appraisals, it has never been disputed as to who of all the poets in the latter half of the last century was at the pinnacle of modern Oriya poetry. In fact it was GPM who settled the issue, if ever there was one, by paying a rare accolade to SR when in one of his poems he wrote, "from the sky tumbled down star and SR."

SR indulged in serious writing for more than seven decades, and hence, it is no wonder that his output was prodigious. He worked almost like a professional writer, or if I have to state somewhat impishly, like a

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habitual offender who never quit his beat, writing till his last days. His residence in Bengal, two decades in Kolkata (1942-62) as Labour Welfare Officer of Keshoram Cotton Mill was not a distraction, but indeed grist to his writing mill. Even after he was seventy years old, with his eyesight failing, when writers seldom do anything else except tedious repetitions, SR continued to bounce. He bounced while many poets half his age and of promise and even achievement, had given up.

As late as a year back or two ago, SR wrote full-blooded lead poems for many eminent Oriya literary journals in their festival issues. They were poems of desolation of course, weary of fatigue and the denudation of times, but unbelievably well-executed and candid. Let me cite a few samples: (i) to facilitate my journey/I have perfumed the mane of the horse/alas, the horse has fled. ("Journey") (ii) life is a sad season/death comes twice/ the first one makes you a martyr/the second, disowns you ("Broken Bridge") (iii) where is my enemy/the beloved enemy/who gains at my fall/ all those here are pygmies ("Fellow Traveller")

SR evidently had a huge repertoire. There are at least twenty anthologies of poetry, of which there is a trinity at the apex: *Baji Raut* (1938), *Pandulipi* (1947) and *Kavita1962* (1962), the last one earned the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964. These constitute the jewels of his crown, and their effulgence remains unmatched till today. His prolificity, as it happens with most poets of longer standing, had also spread into the arena of prose. Thus, in addition to poetry, he has four collections of short stories, one novel, one verse-play, three volumes of literary criticism, and a major research work on the value of literature. SR was an early bird, he wrote his first poem when he was eleven, and published his first collection when sixteen.

After six long decades, the protagonist of *Baji Raut,* the long poem that commemorates the martyrdom of the twelve-year-old boatman boy, who fell to British bullets, still retains the glitter of the first mythification of modern Oriya poetry. In SR's poem Baji Raut has traversed beyond his identity of flesh and blood; from forgetting to memory, and then from memory to immortality. Baji Raut exploded like the fission of a new progressive consciousness. SR had indeed sculpted the poem, not as much as written it, with the bricks of a language that held together tradition and modernity in an incredible bind. Denial of past, recognition of struggle, and optimism for future in *Baji Raut* made SR the Mayakovsky of Oriya poetry.

Sense of realism and assertion of human rights, with an oeuvre which was pastoral and urbane, earned SR the epithet 'Poet of the People.' His village poems did not say that everything was idyllic; poems of war cried

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for resurgence of human spirit, and the poems of the post-Independent era were a subtle mélange of private and social consciousness. Although the scale wavered between romanticism and realism, the social and political sensibilities of his work were unquestioned.

Their impact did not endure however, because of the queer sociology of Orissa, and because Oriya poetic consciousness was encapsulated for half a millennium in the cloak of theology. The musing of the self was more essential than existential. His manifesto has, therefore, been questioned, and at times suspected as a put on by the radicals. But the power of his poetry, his adoption of new forms, new images, new metaphors, his sculpting of an entirely new poetic language, his ability to rise above the immediate, his dexterity in craft, his elevating the commonplace, and imbuing the surreal with sensibility have never been in doubt. In the best of his times, he combined in himself three personas, that of a troubadour, a sculptor, and a visionary, forging frequently new constructs, and going beyond the ambit of words.

If *Baji Raut* evolved to be an acme of progressive writing, *Pandulipi,* an anthology published in 1947, became the harbinger of new poetry in Oriya. This, together with *Banumatira Desha* (1949) brought to Oriya literature new forms such as verse-libre, prose-poetry and a mélange of classic diction with spoken words. These volumes brought in sweeping changes both in form and sensibility.

In *Pandulipi,* the new poetry suddenly ceases to be a handmaiden or a salon-mate. It ceases to be an adornment. Poetry becomes a weapon. It becomes dues ex machina for depicting waste and uncertainty, descent and debris and crumbling of convictions. In Banumatira Desha, poetry becomes a stream of consciousness. Thematically it explores transposition of meanings. It builds up poetic tension around an exchange of currency between realism and dreams. It falters between the night and the false dawn. It is a new code of love, which draws sustenance from the opaque and incomplete, and it has the novelty of the quicksilver rhythm of spoken words.

In SR's work of this period, poetry, like life, gets tired, trips off-centre, and picks up the fragments from dust. The language also changes its morphology, and the rhythm breaks to allow straight talk. His works with their Baudlairean sadness catapult the new Oriya poetic sensibility to the level of international contemporaneity. The poet becomes the new Orpheus, and with his magic flute he leads the new language and the new sensibilities in a spectrum that ranges from ash to rust.

The apotheosis of SR's work came about probably in the mid-point of his career, with the publication of *Swagat* (1958) and *Kavita* 1962 (1962). Both books are aspects of a quest that deals with the predicament of self

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and transgression of the imagined. These two volumes charter his pilgrim's progress from the romanticism of early writings, from political and social stridency, towards exile and freedom of the soul.

Swagat recognizes the fragmentation of self and attempts a dialectic soliloquy between the lost and the found. The doubt and tentativeness, and the lack of anything peremptory, only enhance the ascension of poetry. All pursuits of matter and mind become aspects of the quest, in which the enemy is also the beloved, and elements as diverse as shadows, echoes, wounds and seasons come together to forge a harmony.

Kavita 1962, new sensibilities apart, is full of explosions of poetic language like conch-shells and screws/navel and music/flying minarets/ sleeping wounds. But it also proves that poetry is not a prisoner of its words. There is dialectics here; between the clear and the opaque, music and verbosity, deep and light; but in the end they synthesize. In the transformation that it achieved, there is always freedom from the known. This is more a grace than skill. In the cacophony of his vast opus, a single moonlight line like "in all good things, spring comes only once" illustrates this grace.

Since language is a tradition, and "not an arbitrary assemblage of symbols," influences show up in every poet's work. The poet cannot possibly abdicate the books he has read, the milieu he has lived in. As for influences, Borges goes to admit, in his preface to the *Gold of the Tigers,* that those he had never read are also in him. The influence of Bengal, where SR spent his formative college years, and two more fertile decades of adult life, of Jibanananda Das, of international poetry, of French surrealism particularly, show up in SR's writing like shards of glass in whiteness. But SR had most triumphantly retained his sweep and originality by creating a sensorium firmly planted in a cultural milieu that is unique, and like his loneliness, his very own.

Despite the fame and recognition, which came considerably early, SR worked with several handicaps, and took on his opponents in the mean-streets throughout his life. The brilliance of his onset may have begotten a penumbra of envy. It is curious that Mayadhar Mansingh, a fellow Oriya Poet, in his *History of Oriya Literature* published in 1962, when SR was at his zenith, had dubbed him as the loudest pretender of progressive thought, whose 'real creative work is so small.' While the in-house assessment was so severe, SR went to achieve a string of recognitions outside, first the 'Padma Shri' and then the award of the Sahitya Akademi for his poetry.

The tirades against his leftist tag, and doubts about his convictions, however, continued in tandem with his raptures. His distancing from Orissa in his Bengal years, his return like a bit of an outsider if not as a prodigal son, his international forays, his elitist pursuits including the failed politics,

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his networking, his rich and sanitized diction, his rearranging the rules of form and font, and the involutions of his thought about what the poetic creed would be like, wrought a hiatus, to some degree at least, with certain segments. Some people perceived a duality of persona, and he was blamed for the same otherness, which was the hallmark of his later works. SR of course overcame all ranting and taunting with bursts of his startling, fresh poems whose charm and power flooded Oriya poetry from time to time.

The versatility of SR was manifest in the citation of the Jnanpith Award in 1986; while it acknowledged the rare intensity and robust humanism of his poetry, it also recognized his strength in fiction and literary criticism. Although he had stopped writing short stories years ago, his first work of fiction, *Chitragriba* (1936), a novella, was hailed as a minor classic. His stories not only have a poetic nuance but also an unusual insight into the rural mind that goes beyond the humdrum. SR's ouvre also contains some well-researched literary criticism. *If Pandulipi* (1947) provided a prelude to the new poetry, *Kavita1962* (1962) in its long postscript laid down a creed for the poets. This established SR as the leading ideologue of modern Oriya poetry.

The year 1962 not only featured the publication of his most seminal work, it also marked his homecoming after years of exile. In order to fasten him securely with his new residency, SR started a flurry of activities. They ranged from the setting up of a straw board mill in an industrial estate, to the publication of *Diganta,* a trend-setting literary journal, each issue of which has become a collector's item. SR had picked up its trail from Manoj Das, who was the founder, but in its new edition it turned out to be a blitzkrieg. *Diganta* rapidly became a movement with its exhibitions and workshops, museums and research centre, advocacy of change in font and spelling, publication of arcane texts and scouting of new poetry. I was a chance beneficiary of this renewal. A college student then, totally unknown to SR, the first issue of *Diganta* published my poem as the leading one and caused a minor commotion. I wrote virtually in every issue for some time, and the last one, a straggler, published years after the regular issues had ceased to be, contained twelve of my poems in a bunch. It was an act of unsolicited generosity by SR.

The Orissa years lasted forever, till he breathed his last on August 21, 2004. In the meanwhile the Diganta museum had crumbled, and the new house at Mission Road, Cuttack became old. The foreign forays had become less frequent, and the heat and dust of the residency at Cuttack prevailed. Most of his children, with their families, had gone on to live abroad and the death of his beloved wife, Bhudevi, in 1999, dealt him a crushing blow. In the winter of his life, as if loneliness was not enough, there was the onset

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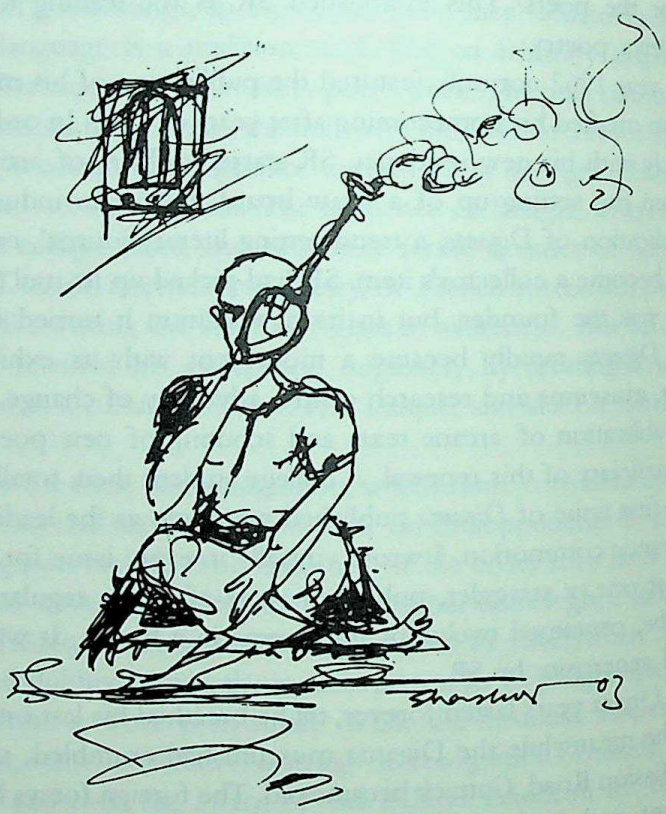
of blindness. There was no sight but that did not bring in silence. SR continued to voice concern for the cause, and even if links with the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights and Secularism had became tenuous with time, his poetry continued to spurt time and again like jets of silver. As Milton, in his blindness,.SR lost no more than "the insubstantial skin of things," and like Borges, I am tempted to believe, he continued to "think of letters and roses," with eyes closed or open.



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Arun Kolatkar
(1932-2004)

Arundhathi Subramaniam

A couple of years ago, a university lecturer from Venice wrote to tell me that he and his wife were planning a trip to India. He wanted some help with planning his itinerary. He had decided that the western part of the country would be his beat, but since this was his first trip to India, he was open to suggestion. There was only one request: could he somehow squeeze in a trip to Jejuri?

There's nothing unusual about literary pilgrimages, of course. I know of Rushdie acolytes who approach Mumbai with about the same degree of veneration that I touched the soil of the ancient amphitheatre in Athens. But this was the first time that I realised that a contemporary poet (aren't they universally looked upon as a grey moth-eaten species, that is when they are acknowledged as visible at all?), and one living in the same city as I did, was capable of pulling off the same act of enchantment.

Arun Kolatkar, the poet whom I'd seen ever so often at his local *adda* in south Mumbai, had, with a slim book of poems (published in 1976) transformed a dusty temple town in western Maharashtra into a hallowed spot for a professor from the other side of the globe. It was a reminder of the amazing alchemic powers of poetry. It was also testimony to what was surely Kolatkar's unique strength: his uncanny ability to transform the commonplace into the magical, the paltry into the profound.

I never knew Arun Kolatkar. I had seen him heaps of times over the years, of course, slouched over a table at the Wayside Inn, his eyes dark and observant under forbidding shaggy brows, taking in (or so I fancifully imagined) the smallest detail, the slightest anomaly in the surrounding landscape. The fact that he seldom turned up at poetry readings and literary gatherings was cited sometimes as proof of his reclusive temperament.

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Those who knew him, however, dismissed that claim. In any case, an air of reserve is something I respect and frequently exude, so I didn't exactly feel an urgent need to initiate an interaction. Perhaps it was the fact that I didn't know him, coupled with the fact that I had been reading his work since I was in college, which made him an almost archetypal presence on the city landscape, a living legend, as it were, in my eyes.

What I did treasure was the odd anecdote that seemed to offer a picture of a somewhat unusual personality. Last year I happened to meet the Irish poet, Matthew Sweeney, at a poetry festival. He mentioned that a major publisher in the UK was keen on publishing Kolatkar and had tried several times to contact him. Kolatkar did not reply.

The story intrigued me. Why would Kolatkar reject the advances of an overseas publisher? Was it cussedness? Reverse snobbery? A wariness of the insidious guises of cultural hegemony? A refusal to become part of a literary circuit? Sheer lack of interest?

Whatever the reason, it's a story I cherish. It's a gesture I respect. For, this is certainly not the response of a careerist poet. In a culture of easy visibility, where an icon-a-minute is served up on the basis of the capacity to carry off a noodle-strap blouse or own a one-crore-rupee watch, this choice to remain 'invisible' seemed to be a far from trivial act of resistance —an act that was likely to go undocumented, and which becomes all the more important for that very reason.

The first time I read *Jejuri* was during my first undergrad year in a dusty nook in the St Xavier's College library in Mumbai. I recall being impressed—something I continued to be, on subsequent readings. But when I revisited it last year during a remarkably quiet and hermetic writer's residency in Scotland, I felt something more than just admiration. Here, I felt, was writing from a guild at which I'd be proud to owe allegiance, glad to do apprenticeship.

Jejuri is, quite simply, a book that never seems to date. The words seem to spring out of even the most battered and dog-eared copy with an alert and invigorating freshness. There is obviously a keen sense of craftsmanship in the deliberate sparseness of the aesthetic, but the end result is anything but mannered. The voice that emerges from these pages is casually sophisticated, wry, colloquial, with a slyly dexterous ability to turn a line in all sorts of unexpected directions.

There is much to admire here, but more importantly – and this was something I discovered that late February evening in the Stirling library – there is much to trust. And what makes you trust this poet is his own ability to trust the singular, the quotidian, the absurd, the irrelevant, the unsung nowness of the moment. It is a power of photographic observation that can

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be unrelenting, ruthlessly unsentimental, but not without wit, and certainly not without compassion. I believe it is based on the faith – and one that I find inspiring – that an unwavering attention to the specific, the unremarkable, the marginal, the evanescent, will lead you eventually to revelation. And in Kolatkar's poetry, it always does. But the insight never arrives through flabby generalisation or creaky editorialising. A larger picture, you discover, is simply implicit in the quiet, determined and incisive documentation of detail.

And so, while *Jejuri* does subvert the conventional notion of the pilgrimage, it does not leave you without a glimpse of the sacred—even if we find it in the least expected places.

The fractured self in quest of wholeness is ironised, but nonetheless implicated at the start of the journey: "Your own divided face in a pair of glasses/ on an old man's nose/ is all the countryside you get to see." Irony is something one finds in abundance here, but it isn't a facile cynicism. There is a wry acknowledgement of a deeply stratified social context: "You seem to move continually forward/ towards a destination/ just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows." But even if you sense that the destination will never be reached, you realise pretty early that there's more going on here than a rationalist repudiation of traditional faith. In any case, the idea of the circular journey that ends where it begins is the oldest theme in pilgrim's literature.

The dividing line between god and stone, we are told, is very thin in *Jejuri*—stone and grass, ruined temples and litters of pups, death and life, exist not merely cheek by jowl, but seem virtually inseparable, one growing almost organically out of the other. It brings one to a recurrent trope in Kolatkar's work—the ephemeral dividing line between the mundane and the miraculous, the accidental and the epiphanic. Thus, the old decaying temple that is no longer a place of worship, is still 'nothing less than the house of god' since it is home to a host of fauna. And the spirit of Jejuri is found not in any of the shrines, but is housed within 'the mangy body of the station dog'. Above all, it is fitting that the pilgrim's true *darshan* occurs not before any temple sanctum, but during a random encounter with an old beggar woman in what is surely one of the strongest poems in the book:

> You turn around and face her
> with an air of finality.
> You want to end the farce.
>
> When you hear her say,
> 'What else can an old woman do
> on hills as wretched as these?'

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You look right at the sky.
Clear through the bullet holes
she has for her eyes.

And as you look on
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter
around the shatterproof crone
who stands alone.

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand.

("An Old Woman")

Senior poet and critic Adil Jussawalla, a close friend of Kolatkar's, recently mentioned that the line from the Gospel according to Matthew, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first," was something that Kolatkar particularly cherished. I found that piece of information fascinating. It seemed entirely consonant with Kolatkar's poetic preoccupation with the lowly, the incidental, the inconsequential, his ability to create an anthem to the everyday, a poetry of the prosaic, and to make the peripheral central to his art. Most importantly, this surfaces in his work not as a trite recycled certitude about the blessedness of the meek, but as an insight arrived at through the inner logic of poetry itself.

Sarpa Satra (his most recently published work along with *Kala Ghoda Poems*) indicts a culture of unexamined violence and vendetta through the incident of a snake sacrifice in one of the most ancient tales of revenge known to India. What makes the evocation of the hideous tragedy of the Khandava forest so effective is the relentless and sinister accumulation of detail:

Trumpeting elephants
rushing towards water
for safety

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trample on half-cooked turtles
as they crawl out of
the boiling lakes.

A gazelle trips over
a dead crab at the water's edge
and sprains an ankle.

The taste of honey
still on its tongue,
a bear bursts into flames,

falls from a tree
with a burning branch between its legs
to roll on the flaming grass below.

The chakra slices
every single honeybee
from a swarm in flight

and returns to the tip
of Krishna's finger
for fresh instructions.

In *Kala Ghoda Poems*, the dramatis personae are again humble folk, a pageant of social outcastes: the one-eyed baby bather, the dog, the crow, the tart, the leper, the blind man, the rat poison man, the hash seller. The flea-bitten pi-dog on the traffic island is evoked as a monumental presence, the Ur inhabitant of the island, with a hoary pedigree, and the great tragic denunciation of the gods is given to the local drunk. The graphic artist's ruthless imagistic precision is evident again, but the result is anything but drearily naturalistic. There are lyrical moments, but found once more in unexpected places: in the street urchin's "lusty and luminous" "arc of piss"; in the "philharmonic gulmohur" with its benediction of "minims"; "the polyphonic shade of the banyan"; the traffic lights that "burn with the cold passion of rubies"; the municipal sweeper's "free arm, raised/ in the air,/ a flamingo in flight"; the 'sun burst' of a watermelon; and the scrawny little kitten's mystical moment when it gets to kiss "its first shrimp."

It is a darker world than the one we saw in *Jejuri*. It is an impoverished, unjust, embattled world, subsisting not on hope, but on something more primal—perhaps the regenerative power of life itself. There are no sentimental attempts to present this as a happy fraternity of beaming homeless urban pariahs. The old lavatory attendant with her cataract vision sees the

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"new day" "for the clever forgery it really is". This is a world stalked by the ever-present demon of hunger, and even while the restaurants at Kala Ghoda serve steaming breakfasts, there is a keen awareness of another world, disconcertingly close, where Dalits are being force-fed on shit by high-caste Hindus.

And yet, there are the irrational acts of generosity that also inflect the picture and keep it from irredeemable bleakness. Nowhere is this more vividly evoked than in the portrait of Our Lady of Idlis, the woman whom the author lyrically christens Annapoorna, who shares her breakfast with the locals of Kala Ghoda. If the finest poetry changes the way we map our world, one wonders after reading this extract whether idlis can ever be the same again:

23.

Islands of idlis float
belly up
or splash about

in seas of sambar,
among the wreckage
of red chilli peppers,

submerged aubergines,
torpedoed tomatoes,
peppercorn mines,

drumsticks
drifting
like shattered masts.

Or, like oil-slick
seals,
blink in the sun.

24.

Idlis,
plump and spongy lenses,
magnify our appetites,

and, through the telescope
of shared hope,
bring the stars within our reach.

('Breakfast at Kala Ghoda')

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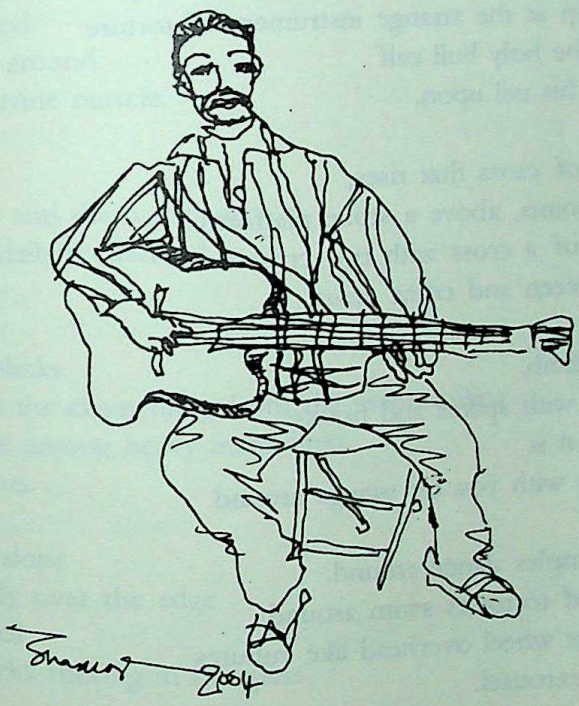
Perhaps it is this, then, that I ultimately find so empowering about Kolatkar's poetry: its quiet almost nonchalant ability to "bring the stars within our reach". It is poetry that reminds one of the redemptive powers of the image, its power to heal, to make whole. It is a reaffirmation of something we all know and yet so often forget: the fact that poetry that values metaphor need not spell an effete preoccupation with a life-denying craft. Far from it. It can be, instead, about an active, curious, warm, transformational engagement with the messy business of life itself. Kolatkar's poetry transforms what it witnesses, not by depriving detail of its whimsicality and uniqueness, but by recognising and honouring its idiosyncrasy, and finding it a place in a worldview that is arrestingly quirky but unfailingly hospitable and inclusive.

It is a great legacy to leave behind.

❑



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Arun Kolatkar

From *Jejuri*

A Kind Of A Cross

Tail tucked between its legs
and legs tucked under a metal plated body,
the bull calf sits on a pedestal
in the temple courtyard.

You stroke a horn. Thump him on the hump
and look up at the strange instrument of torture
that even the holy bull calf
has turned his tail upon.

It's a kind of cross that rises,
on creaky joints, above a stone platform.
It's a kind of a cross with two cross bars
you lie between and come apart,

limb from limb.
As the one with spikes and hooks
stays where it is
and the one with you on swings around.

Hills and temples dance around.
Bull calfs and tortoises swim around.
Constellations wheel overhead like vultures
in one mad carousel.

Except of course that they don't.
It's illegal.

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It's the wrong time of the day
for constellations anyway.
No screaming drop of blood
firebrigades down the good wood
ten laned with time
and deepening grain.

With a fingernail, you try
to pry a rivet from the sirloin.
And hurriedly, with the ball of a thumb,
to smooth a dent from the brass rump.

The Temple Rat

The temple rat uncurls its tail
from around the longer middle prong.
Oozes halfway down the trident
like a thick gob of black blood.

Stops on the mighty shoulder
of the warrior god
for a quick look around.
A ripple in the divine muscle.

Scarce a glance
at the fierce eyes and the war paint
on the face of Malhari Martand,
and it's gone.

The temple rat blinks
as it loops down the chain hung from the stone ceiling
and its eyes shine among heavy metal links
licked by highlights.

It slips down a slope
and looks brassily over the edge
of the bigger bell
at the green sparks shaking in the glass

bangles massed in the hands
of the teen age bride on her knees,

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crushing bananas on the top
of the stone linga.
And having noticed
the trace of a smile on the priest's face,
buried under a grey, week deep beard,
the temple rat

disappears in a corner of the sanctum
just behind the big temple drum.
Not a minute too soon.
Because just then the bell springs into action.

The Pattern

a checkerboard pattern
some old men must have drawn
yesterday

with a piece of chalk
on the back of the twenty foot
tortoise

smudges under the bare feet
and gets fainter all the time as
the children run

The Horseshoe Shrine

That nick in the rock
is really a kick in the side of the hill.
It's where a hoof
struck

like thunderbolt
when Khandoba
with the bride sidesaddle behind him on the blue
horse

jumped across the valley
and the three

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went on from there like one
spark
fleeing from flint.
To a home that waited
on the other side of the hill like a hay
stack.

From *Kala Ghoda Poems*

The Boomtown Lepers' Band

Trrrap a boom chaka
shh chaka boom tap

Ladies and gentlemen (crash),
here comes (bang), here comes (boom),,
here comes the Boomtown Lepers' Band,
drumsticks and maracas tied to their hands
bandaged in silk and the finest of gauze,
and clutching tambourines in scaly paws,

Trrrap a boom chaka
shh chaka boom trap

Whack.
Let the city see its lion face
in the flaky mirror of our flesh.
Slap a tambourine (thwack),
let cymbals clash.
Come on, let the coins shake rattle and roll
in our battered aluminium bowl—
as our noseless singer
lets out a half-hearted howl
to belt out a tuneless song
for a city without soul.

Here we come (bang)
and there we go (boom)
pushing the singer in a wheelbarrow.

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Trrap a boom chaka
shh chaka boom tap
Trrap a boom chaka
shh chaka boom trapp

Bon Appetit

1

I wish bon appétit
to the frail old fisherwoman

(tiny,
she is no more than just

an armload of bones
grown weightless over the years,

and caught
in a net of wrinkles)

who, on her way to the market,
has stopped

to have a quick breakfast
in a hole-in-the-wall teashop,

and is sitting hunched
over a plate of peas

—her favourite dish—
on a shaky table,

tearing a piece of bread
with her sharp claws

to soak it in the thin gravy
flecked with red chilli peppers;

and whose mouth is watering

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at this very moment, I bet,
for I can almost taste
her saliva

in my mouth.

2.

And I wish bon appétit
to that scrawny little

mocheaten kitten
—so famished it can barely stand,

stringy tail,
bald patch on grungey back,

white skin showing
through sparse fur—

that has emerged
from a small pile of rubbish nearby,

slipped once
on a bit of onion skin,

and, making its way
slowly but unerringly

towards the shallow basket
full of shrimps

that the fisherwoman has left
on the pavement

before entering the teashop,
has finally managed to get there,

raised itself on its hindlegs
to put its dirty paws

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on the edge of the basket,
and kissed

its first shrimp.

From *Sarpa Satra*

"Jaratkaru to Aastika"

Which is not to say that I
have ever been able to forgive Takshaka
for what he did.

To say that he was always an extremist
is not to make excuses for him
He deserves the harshest punishment in the book.

And I certainly do not approve
of the way he's hiding now
behind Indra's throne to save his skin,

hoping his powerful friend
will help him escape the consequences
of an act we're now paying for.

It only shows what cowards
all terrorists are
behind their snarling ferocious masks.

When he came to see me
that time, after filling Parikshita,
to brag about

how infernally clever he had been
and what a mighty blow he had struck
in the name of justice,

hoping to wow an impressionable
kid-sister and to bask
in her wide-eyed admiration,

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I had to disappoint him.
I was only
horrified at what he had done.

What I don't understand,
I said to him, is
where have you been all this time?

Why did you not make Arjuna
pay for his crime
while he was yet alive?

And God knows he lived long enough—
in fact so feeble had he become
in his old age, I am told,

that he couldn't even hold
a bow in his hands.
You could easily have seized your chance then.

Why did you wait
for his grandson to grow up
to give him a taste of your terrible poison

instead of Arjuna.
Don't you know
that true revenge accepts no substitute?

A hundred arrows leave
Parcha's bow
all at the same time

to go after a flock
of a hundred swans
winging its way to safety

and (well done!)
do not miss
even one.

Look, Arjuna!

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See that lioness
with her mane in flames?

Don't let her get away
just because
she has a cub in her mouth.

Oh, good!
You got them both
with a single shaft.

And where, you may well ask,
was Takshaka
when all this was happening?

In Kurukshetra, if you please!
And what was he doing there?
Having a dip

in the holy Saraswati river
to fulfil a vow,
as he claims?

Or spending a night
in the arms of a Pulilivan girl
he was involved with at the time,

as I suspect? Never mind.
What is certain is that
he was not where he was needed most:

to defend his wife and son,
and protect
the forest he held in trust for the gods.

For although his son got away
- a miraculous escape -
his wife was not so lucky

and fell prey to a shaft
that came from the magical quiver

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of the valiant Arjuna.

Trumpeting elephants
rushing towards water
for safety.

trample on half-cooked turtles
as they crawl out of
the boiling lakes.

A gazelle trips over
a dead crab at the water's edge
and sprains an ankle.

The taste of honey
still on its tongue,
a bear bursts into flames,

falls from a tree
with a burning branch between its legs
to roll in the flaming grass below.

The chakra slices
every single honeybee
from a swarm in flight

and returns to the tip
of Krishna's finger
for fresh instructions.

By the time these two were done,
it was all gone,
everything.

Not just the trees, birds, insect's and animals
(herds upon herds
of elephants, gazelles, antelopes),

but people, Aastika,
people as well.
Simple folk,

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children of the forest
who had lived there happily for generations,
since time began.

They've gone, without a trace.
With their language
that sounded like the burbling of a brook,

their songs that sounded like the twitterings of birds,
and the secrets of their shamans
who could cure any sickness

by casting spells with their special flutes
made from the hollow
wingbones of red-crested cranes.

Why did they do it?
Who knows!
Just for kicks, maybe.

Maybe just the fact
that now they had all these fantastic weapons
went to their heads

and they just couldn't wait
to test their awesome powers.
Maybe they just wanted

a clear title to the land,
unchallenged
by so much as a tigermoth.

They were certainly determined to make sure
that nothing got out
of that conflagration alive.

The moment anything tried,
they drove it back into that inferno
or mowed it down,

as the two of them
thundered around the burning forest
in their divine chariots.

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Kala Ghoda Poems by Arun Kolatkar, Pras Prakashan, Mumbai. July 2004. Pp. 162. Rs. 360/- *Sarpa Satra* by Arun Kolatkar, Pras Prakashan, Mumbai, July 2004. Pp. 84. Rs. 150/-

Time has another pace when it follows Kolatkar into Kala Ghoda. It no longer belongs to the rat race. It plods along in the vein of the dog that followed Yudhishthira on his last journey. Now, weary of the task of making it to heaven, it lies down like the pi-dog, the descendent of the former, at the exact centre of the triangular traffic island, 'hugging the ground, (his) jaw at rest on crossed forepaws' ("Pi-Dog"). The next moment, it gets up, and trundles along like a garbage trolley, or it stands there, a barefoot queen drying her hair in the sun, 'swaying from side to side, / shaking her head, rhythmically, like a cow elephant in trance' ("The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads"). At times, it is a coconut frond that clowns around, jumps and dances 'like a performing bear, a green one,' in the hands of a municipal street cleaner who finds it a better tool than her broom ("Meera"). Or, it wings down slowly like a flower –'yellow and irrelevant'– and brushes past an earlobe, grazes a cheek and disappears down the front of a low-cut blouse ("A Game of Tigers and Sheep").

Watching this dreamy stride of Time across Kala Ghoda, you suddenly feel, you are not in a city that melts everything in its intensity of struggle and accelerated roles of every sort, and stop to take a second look. Now you begin to see—the pensive Prince of Wales, drawing you into an old world charm with immense grey arms; Jehangir, staring desperately at the deserted street; David Sasson, sticking his 'pilloried head/ out of a medallion/in the pediment above the archway/ of the Mechanics Institute' ("David Sasson"). You see Max Muller, Elphinstone, St. Andrew, gulmohurs, fiddles, watermelons…, no longer fleetingly, but vividly, graphically.

This is the Kala Ghoda that Arun Kolatkar, your decidedly reclusive septuagenarian poet, offers you. In his *Kala Ghoda Poems*, which has appeared after decades of his winning the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry for *Jejuri*, Kolatkar sharpens and renews the experiences of your very familiar world. Most importantly, he lends you an alternative eye to see into the life of apparently irrelevant things.

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Kala Ghoda is the crescent that stretches from the Regal circle to the University of Mumbai. The name comes from the old black equestrian statue of King Edward VII which was earlier placed at the present car parking zone. The statue was removed to the Victoria Gardens in Byculla in the early 1970's. With a concentration of centres like the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Prince of Wales Museum, the Jehangir Art Gallery, the Bombay Natural History Society, the David Sassoon Library and the University, this place is a hub of cultural activity. Over the years, Kala Ghoda has come to be instinctively identified with its festival, an interactive cultural mélange that spreads from November to January every year, which brings works in the fields of music, dance, theatre, film, and art from across the country for Mumbaikars.

In Arun Kolatkar's poetry, you see another face of this much-touted art district of Mumbai. The life at the peripheries slowly starts coming to the fore, and Kolatkar's other vision indeed catches it in its characteristic acts. There is a resurrection of the rubbish, the outcastes, the thrown-away. As crushed grapes gain greater glory after the 'penance in a dark cellar', or clay finds a new purpose after 'being tested in fire', or the rubbish go to a landfill site 'in preparation of a new city,' the marginalized too have their tryst with destiny when Kolatkar finds them ("The Song of Rubbish"). Thus lepers, blind men, rat-poison men, potato peelers, street cleaners, shoeshine boys, dogs, crows, old bicycle tyres, charas pills, kerosene, lice, shit...in their veritable third world make their presence felt in Kolatkar's Kala Ghoda. It is not just to the sights of this third world that Kolatkar draws you, but its music, smells, tastes and feels as well. Sometimes its music comes upon you with a bang and a boom like the "Boomtown Lepers' Band": Trrap a boom chaka / Shh chaka boom tap

While you still have not got over the rhythm, there arise 'the arpeggios of lice and harmonics of nits' produced by the fairy fingers of a street dweller as they run through the lousy head of her lover ("Lice"). You hear the deciduous symphony of the philharmonic gulmohur leaves 'falling like yellow – and slightly elongated – minims'("Words for a Cellist"). The drunkard delivers a shit sermon that rises 'like a flock of shadow ravens from his mouth' ("The Shit Sermon"). All the clocks stop, and 'the city holds its breath' as the watermelon cart 'goes click-clack, prolonging the road, stretching the morning into eternity' ("Watermelons").

You also come to name the smells of Kala Ghoda's ceaseless morning. The 'faint but unmistakable smell' of cheap tobacco; 'the mildly narcotic, but very distracting fragrance' of yellow flowers; kerosene, hash, cigarettes. And yes, it's breakfast time at Kala Ghoda; a variety of breakfast smells

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pervade the air, too: Olympia's khima pao, Baghdadi's dal gosht, puri bhaji from Kailash Parbat, Sarvi's aab gosht, kebabs with sprigs of mint from Gulshan-e-Iran, Noor Mohamadi's nali nehari, Oriental's baida ghotala, Benazir's paya soup, brun maska from Military Café, Swagat's upma, shira from Anand Vihar, fried eggs and bacon from Wayside Inn.

For the denizens of Kala Ghoda, all these delicious smells culminate in the taste of the idli and sambar that they are served in the morning. Look, Annapoorna, the lady with a head of wirewool hair, peppercorn eyes, and a motherly smile for everyone, is already here, carrying a jumbo aluminium box full of idlis and a bucket full of sambar in her hand. Where is everybody? O, there they come, the fire-eaters, 'each and every hungry and homeless soul'– the little vamp and her grandma, the blind man, the ogress, the rat-poison man, the pinwheel boy, the hipster queen of the crossroads, the Demosthenes of Kala Ghoda, the pregnant queen of tarts, the laughing Buddha, the knucklebones champ, the shoeshine boy, the old paralytic in a wheel chair, the legless hunchback, the leper, the hippy –'to receive the sacrament of idli'. And

> the convergence
> of all the loose appetite in the air
> within a one-mile radius
>
> to that one spot
> has created a bubble in time,
> shimmering with the joy of living,
>
> reflecting all the colours
> of hope,
> and about forty-five minutes across.
> ("Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda")

This morning joy is actually a bubble – opalescent, but flimsy and ephemeral – in time, but it gains a timeless quality in Kolatkar's alternative aesthetics that emerges from a clear perception of the fringe experiences in Kala Ghoda. It is only when you create a pace of your own as different from the rat race, and step aside, you see how things as seemingly irrelevant as a yellow flower could help the sheep in a game with tigers. Kolatkar does exactly that. Perhaps the reclusive nature of the poet is a clue to the discovery of this third world aesthetics in *Kala Ghoda Poems*.

Kolatkar calls the now Mumbai, 'a city without soul'. He feels that the city 'gets more and more unrecognisable with every passing year.' It is

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with an ironical eye that Kolatkar looks at the 'cement-eating, blood-guzzling' Mumbai of the present. When he says he finds himself cast in a role that he detests, 'that of an observer, a spectator,' the irony in his words only intensifies the pain that this poet feels about the 'slow disintegration of a city/ I cared about more than any other' ("David Sassoon"). It is this care and love for Mumbai, which really provokes his bitterness about the soulless way in which the city keeps changing. Despite all this bitterness, "Man of the Year," the penultimate poem in the collection, reveals Kolatkar's insatiable longing to remain in this world, and his despair that time is running out fast:

> But nobody knows better than I
> that time
> is one thing I'm running out of fast,
>
> and my one regret is going to be this:
> to leave this world
> so full of girls I never kissed.
>
> ("Man of the Year")

He tells us the names of the girls, too, those Mumbai names from all sects: Malati, Niloufer, Anjali, Shanta, Alpana, Kalpana, Shirin, Zarine, Sylvia, Maria, Harlene, Yasmin, Nina, Kamala, Mona, Lopa. These telling names instantly conjure up the images of the lives that fall into the melting pot of Mumbai, and you suddenly realise that Kala Ghoda is a metaphor – a metaphor for Mumbai, and even for the world at large. The man of the year bids everyone good bye, and collapses with a half-sung happy New Year: 'I wish a happy new year t.'

The abruptness of the end stops your breath as though a whole world of yours has been brought to a brusque halt. After a while and a sigh, you see that the year has already passed by without even giving you time to plead with it to stay on. And your heart goes out to Kolatkar; with an inexplicable tenderness, you realise, life must go on despite departures of years and men, 'at Kala Ghoda as elsewhere.' That is the never-say-die spirit that this beautifully produced volume of twenty-eight poems brings to you. The cover, designed by Kolatkar himself, vividly illustrates "A Game of Tigers and Sheep," and adds to the overall charm of this magnificent album. Indeed, a book one could cuddle to one's heart in the loneliest of moments.

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It is interesting that after a space of decades, Kolatkar has come out with two books. *Sarpa Satra*, a long poem based on a theme from the Mahabharata, has also been released along with *Kala Ghoda Poems*. This poem is on the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit, performed to annihilate the Nagas from the face of the earth.

The brimming life in Kala Ghoda is pitted against the rage of death in *Sarpa Satra*. When Arjuna and Krishna burned down the Khandava forest:

> 'It contained five thousand
> different kinds of butterflies alone
> and a golden squirrel found nowhere else.
> Some of the trees in that place
> were, oh
> hundreds and hundreds of years old, easily;
> and it contained a wealth
> of medicinal plants
> that were not found anywhere else.' And 'Not just the
> trees, birds, insects and animals
> (herds upon herds
> of elephants, gazelles, antelopes),'

but people as well – the children of the forest – were 'gone without a trace,' with their language, songs and secrets.

Departing from the epic in its view of things through a Naga's eyes, Sarpa Satra talks of the furious fires of hatred that continues through generations. One act of violence leads to another. Takshak, who loses his wife in the burning forest, bites Parikshit, Arjun's grandson. Takshak is a Naga, so Parikshit's son Janamejaya vows to annihilate his entire species. He conducts the Sarpa Satra, the fire sacrifice, to which snakes are drawn by a spell, only to be burned to death. Jaratkaru, Takshak's younger sister, asks her son Astika to stop Janmejaya from this appalling act. Born a man, Astika has to do it to make sure that 'the last vestige of humanity' he is heir to, his patrimony, 'does not go up in smoke….'

Kolatkar's disgust about violence-ridden worlds, mythical or real, is evident in *Sarpa Satra*, too. This disgust only sharpens the edge of his irony:

> 'What would your reaction be
> if someone were to come up to you/and say,
> My father died of snakebite.
> When? Oh, I was too young then.
> I don't even remember,
> but I'm going to avenge his death
> by killing

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every single snake that lives;
yes,
by wiping out the whole species
from the face of earth.
You'd naturally assume first
that the man was joking.
And after you realise he's not
that he's completely serious,
you may look at him closely, perhaps,
trying to remember the name of a good shrink.
Or tell him about your own plan
to cleanse the earth of all ants
because one bit your mum.'

Ironical juxtaposition of different cultural quotients, multilingual wanderings, unpredictable imagery, and continuity of themes are characteristics of Kolatkar's poetry. Modern World terminology like secret police, blank cheque, business, plum job, editor are woven into the texture of the mythical subject of *Sarpa Satra*. The seemingly jarring juxtaposition reminds us how the primeval fires of destruction continue to consume our world even to this day.

Kolatkar's mode of perpetuating a single theme to the length of entire books has by now become familiar to his readers. All his three books in English, *Jejuri, Kala Ghoda Poems*, and Sarpa Satra are evidence to his meditative mind, as are his Marathi works, *Droan, Bhijki Vahi,* and *Chirimiri*. Perhaps, it is the same unwillingness to let go easily that makes Arun Kolatkar the poet of our times, who belongs, and wants to always belong to everything that is a part of our age.

Rizio Raj
❑

Editor's Note

This review was commissioned and written in early August, before Kolatkar passed away.

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A Daughter Remembers

Reva Bodas

I am going home.....
I will be boarding the train soon,
I am going home.
The enthusiasm has turned into a weakening horror
Loads of work to be done
(The list is long),
I am going home.

Everything in my home
Belongs to my Aai and Baba.
It belongs to my dead parents.
I have to take care of it.
I am going home.
The dining table,
And the discussions around it
Are lost in the dust
Which rests on the photograph
Of my family.
I have to clean it up.
I am going home.

Their smell on their bed
Where they slept, made love,
Laughed and saw dreams.
The atmosphere there has become ghost like.
I have to make it unsullied.
I am going home.
The wardrobe hangs in it

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Their clothes
It is packed with
Suiting and shirting and sarees
The wardrobe inside me hangs in it;
The emptiness, the vacuum and the nothingness
I have to arrange it.
I am going home.

My home,
Which once lived with my family;
Seems to be dead now.
Has been cremated twice.
I have to make it live.
I am going home.

I get down at the station. My eyes search for someone. It is 4.30 in the morning. The month of July, humid and hot. I feel uncomfortable, not because of the sticky atmosphere but because I can't see anybody familiar. Though I know that no body will come but sometimes heart starts believing in spirits and before the old battle between my heart and my mind starts, I move for my home. Every turn, every corner, every signboard, seems to be known. I get down in front of a building which was new fourteen years back. The mismanagement has made it look more older than what it actually is. The building has seen many mishaps and probably has been unable to stand those. Well after investigating every nook and corner I come to the second floor and here I stand in front of a door which bears the name plate of ' NAG BODAS'. I read the name, repeat it several times and with every repetition I feel proud of being his daughter. With the proud feeling I enter and the first sentence that come into my mind is 'Aai and Baba I am home.' I know, even if I shout, scream there won't be any answer; instead, there is a chance while my mind think of their voices, my heart may respond. If peace could get the physical form, it will be the same as I see there. Draping the garment of silence. I am reminded of the 'Unravished bride of quietness and the foster child of silence' by John Keats. I move around, unlocking each room of that house and of my mind too. The rooms have been locked for seven months! I open the balcony for some ventilation and tears come down rolling. Almost the whole day goes in cleaning up. Two lizards aad one pigeon I find dead and the thought arises that everything in that house has died except me.

My uncle i.e. my father's brother arrives the same day. At once I am moved by every action of his. He resembles Baba too much.The manner

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in which he carries himself, his body language all remind me of Baba. His style of talking is same but his talks are too indifferent, cold and with this aloofness every step he takes he is removed from my heart unlike Baba. But one thing is sure and that is we love each other. He by not asking me anything about my present life and I for not being asked about anything.

Among the three brothers and one sister my father was the eldest. I hardly remember any of my uncle coming to our place and spending some part of their vacations with us. Neither they came nor we went. Earlier I found it a bit strange but as I grew up I understood the reason and this time when I met my uncle I was convinced that their not coming to our place was a nice thing to happen.

I spend a sleepless night. The reason being the retrospection. My Kaka i.e. my Maushi's husband has also come with me to Gwalior in this errand. He mentions about my uncle's snoring the next day and I am assured of his sleepless night as well. The long list of works to be done has played its role nicely upon him.

Next day early in the morning we three leave for Ambah. Ambah is the place where my father was born and brought up. Reaching Ambah is not difficult but the rickety bus and the crowd makes our journey of two hours the most unpleasant experience. Finally we reach Ambah. There, my one more uncle who lives in Delhi joins us. There is an ancestral house in Ambah which is to be sold. My Dad's sister lived there but now she is dead and there is no one to take care of the big house. After the paper work is done we go to see the house and to hand over the keys to the other party.

Ambah is a very small place. I am introduced to Baba's friends and am told the stories of their friendship. They are least bothered about my name. They just know that I am *Bandu ki chori. Bandu* is a common maharashtrian nick name and *chori* is a Hindi word for daughter. They ask me about my college. I am surprised to know that they know about my music workshop which was organised by The Government of India in Hyderabad two years back.

Talking and walking we come to the house. A huge courtyard surrounded by rooms, stairs at one side for the terrace. An old house. I am not sure what do my uncles felt for themselves but I feel sorry for them. This house is the last thing they possessed in this village. They will never come back here again because they have nothing to come back to. Their own village bids them good-bye and for a moment I feel scared, for I know even I will have to face the same situation some day when I will sell my house.The thought of being seperated from my house is somehow very disturbing and

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cruel. I am reminded of lines by Hugh Prather: "I don't consult my future to know how happy I am today." And I decide not to think about the Gwalior house.

After a tiring day we come back to Gwalior. My one uncle has gone back to Delhi. The other uncle has come with us. Again I spend a sleepless night. I keep on lying in bed and think about everything. My uncle leaves the next morning and the following two days are spent in completing other works listed in the list.

Finally the day arrives when we are to leave Gwalior and return to Jabalpur. We spend the last day in cleaning up and tidying up. Books are sent back to their respective shelves, moth balls are bought to be kept in cupboards and our suitcases are packed. But before we leave one important thing is to be done, "The Locking," one by one I lock the rooms and then the balconies and then the main door. We leave for the station. We reach just in time. I occupy my berth and as the train moves forward I lock the last window which I had kept open for some ventilation. The window not to be opened till my next visit.

❑

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Gopal Lahiri

Shame

I walk across the street daily
See numerous faces of children
Their tearless eyes see nothing
They whistle through bloodless lips
They are five, six, seven, eight, nine...
Their smile frozen in filthy shouts
They cannot hear surges break on reefs and rocks
Slumbering hills and glowing springs are their distant dream
Their over wearied hands ready for begging
They are five, six, seven, eight, nine...
Starvation pierces the marrow
hunger drains love for life
No place to sleep, no time to weep
No warm beds, no caring parents
No longer remembers sweet lyrics
They are five, six, seven, eight, nine...
They eye every gesture of mine
Watch me with eyes aflame
Those grey dead eyes follow me
Those frosted eyes cut me to the bone
They are five, six, seven, eight, nine...
I can not bear to feel
I do not care where they are born
They make me question my existence
I wrap my arms and squeeze
I hide my face in the passing crowd.
They are five, six, seven, eight, nine.

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Looking Forward

In the airport she looked as a stranger
her rose-coloured dress, her glowing jewellery
ear pieces in a crossword puzzle design
rings wrapped in her fingers flashing in light
she was in her true elements.
Throughout the sprawling lounge
no one escaped her notice barring me
Her elevated forehead creased with
a baffled frown perhaps
A condensed smile peeping through her lips.
And in the front wall a portrait hung
A pin-up boy dressed in a bright-coloured shirt
tucked in ocean blue jeans—
all of a sudden captured her attention
she was absorbed in art drenched in translucent light.
a window with Venetian shutters down
a little girl stumbled and fell down at a distance
a jostling crowd roared in laughter—
Filling her cracks and holes inside her hearts
her face still clouded in smoke of cigarettes
At that very moment I was more than sure
Her termite tunnel vision
To be crumbled by time and in diligence
She would invite me to soak in rain
In the dark leafy flower garden.

Coming Closer

Through the profound darkness of the surrounds
we did not speak, savour the smell of green
A moment before I felt I was lost
but her growing presence melted my fear
Under the dark canopy of thick tall trees
I sought to give my all in seclusion
In this starlit shadowy obscure forest
we sat too close on the soft bed of grass
Night passed slowly in complete silence

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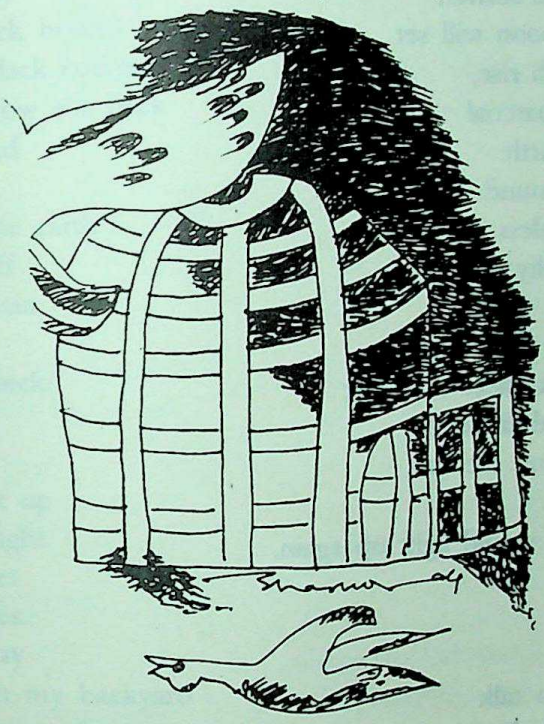
and watched her eyes burning in great passion
I took her folded hands, she hardly moved
I could still hear her silent indrawn breath
Those shining eyes stirred the warm blood in me
she plucked my heart, kissed my wet lips apart.

❑



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Gulzar

Universe

1

In a few trillion years
when the sun grows cold
and its ashes scatter;
when no moon will set
and no earth rise,
the burnt charcoal
of planet earth
will float around
lost and aimless
in dark murky light.
I sometimes think,
if a poem
written on a sheet of paper
flying around aimlessly
would land on the sun,
perhaps,
and the sun would light up again.

2

If I wish to talk
to the neighbouring galaxies
how will my voice reach them
cutting through the layers
of the skies?
Even at the speed of light
it'll take a hundred years
to cross the silent spaces.

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All my words
will crush into a dot of a full stop
when they pass through the black hole.
Will they understand my words?
Can I make them understand?

3
Our sun is a mere dwarf
in the suburban galaxy
of Milky Way,
and its light can't
reach my outer limits.

When I pass by
Mars and Jupiter,
I meet on the way
whirlpools of black holes,
whose spinning black eddies
crush me and throw me back
in to the wasteland
of my search.
I am bound to the earth
I cannot shake off
the permanent chain
of gravity
from my pliant neck.

4
Whenever I wake up
in the dead of night
I go out bare feet
and cross the skies.
I take the pathway
which leads from my backyard
to the neighbouring galaxy
and keep walking
looking for a planet
if be awake
and be willing to invite me
like a good neighbour:
stay the night with me,

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I am lonely here
as you are on your earth.

Translated from Urdu by J.P. Das

Genesis

1
Endless space
infinite time
fire and smoke
enveloping the universe.
'Novas' bursting forth
every moment.
Suns and planets
sprouting like sparks
over trillions of miles.
And newer worlds and galaxies
taking shape.
'Mother Kaal'
picked up God
and placed Him
on a round blue planet
in the farflung world
of a distant galaxy
and said:
Impatient you;
You will grow on your own.

2
The courtyard was full of smoke.
Mother Kaal was blowing
on the damp firewood.
The impatient child,
in the meantime,
played with smoke,
pulling it by the edges
to pitch the sky's tent.
He caught the pale yellow horizon

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by its plaits
and fashioned the boundaries
of the ocean.
Mother Kaal kept on feeding
dry twigs into the shimmering fire,
for the tree of fire
to grow in the fireplace.

3
By the fireplace
Mother Kaal was rolling
the loafs of time
to bake.
The impatient child
played with his empty plate
spinning it to day and night.
Kaal Mai worried,
the bellmetal sky
might fall from His hands.
and spill the grains of stars.
So,
she placed the bowl of the moon
on the child's plate.

4
Mother Kaal sits by the fireplace
waiting for the grains in the pot
to come to a boil.
The impatient child
is playing with the bowl
on the metal plate,
spinning it with His finger.
Mai is worried
that some planet
might slip off the solar system
and fall into the fireplace.
Oh! How long would it take
for the black pot of the universe
to come to a boil?

Translated from Urdu by J.P. Das

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Pioneer 10[1]

Numerous dead and live stars,
numerous dead and live moons.
A million suns
scattered like fireflies
in the surging floods
of humming fumes.
The world of endless silent spaces
where distances are beyond measure.
The learned traveller of Pioneer 10
crosses through the voids
and soars
collecting images
and preserving them for life.
Like the poet walking through
voids, dead and alive,
on this little warm earth
and collecting
images of life
and preserving them.

Translated from Urdu by J.P. Das

Shoemaker Levy[2]

By habit, now
I look up at the sky
when I step out
to cross the road.
The rich princely lights
of Mars, Mercury and Venus
keep running all over to spaces.

It is only last week
that a comet

1. A space-probing rocket vehicle sent in 1973. It has crossed our solar system long back.
2. A comet, which was named after the two scientists who discovered it. Levy and Shoemaker. The comet crashed on Jupiter in July, 1994.

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"Shoemaker Levy"
of our very own galaxy
had bumped into Jupiter!
The flames flew across
millions of miles.
I wonder
how many centuries it'll take
for the Jupiter's wounds to heal.

Translated from Urdu by J.P. Das

View from *Mir*[3]

I love the night
stretched out on the runway.
The blue, yellow, red, lights
reach out to the distance
like waking planets.
I feel, I am at
the space station *Mir*
to catch the flight
to planet AK438.

A mighty bird from space
lands at midnight
and robot-like men
emerge from its wings
and get lost in the swirling dark.
The celestial bird flies away
and vanishes
in the darkness of the Universe,
leaving behind a mercurial silence.
The night,
stretched on the liquid darkness,
trembles, and calms down.
I love the night
stretched out on the runway.

Translated from Urdu by J.P. Das

3. A space station launched by Russia in the year 1986.

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Haraprasad Das

A Seventeenth Century Poet Addressing a Poet's meet in 2004

I pay obeisance at the lotus feet
of the Lord,
for I am here
in the midst of friends
without fear
of termites,
I too am a termite here
among termites
raising this evening hour
grain by grain
out of nothing in particular
but sure.

I wrote in the seventeenth century
in half-light
on palm leaf
with a stylus,
it was hard work for a minor poet
it became harder as the mud caked
and alphabets began to wobble with fame
and caps on their heads started falling off
at odd places as God became kinder
to the King who gave silver to poets in lieu
of honour.

But then,
that was a great time
for inscribing in poetry
what commerce failed to capture:

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a woman's body
like a fruit-laden tree
standing in the courtyard in moonlight,
guarded by a moustached and tonsured wind
alone but armed
with only an arrow of metaphor
as men slept like logs near
open doors to bar
stray animals and an occasional lover
—all was well with the world,

I wrote in rhymed couplets
for that was the order of the day
to keep words fastened to their own leash
You may laugh
at that lack of freedom,
but then
that was what
made copulation a major theme
under the watchful eyes of divinity
who seldom noticed the fifth leg
of the fourposter where
entwined lovers learnt from each other
the martial art of beseeching favour.

You have no love
in your poetry any more
if at all, it makes women laugh
when men are not there,
and men pass them by
with their heads firm on the shoulders
Oh Shame!
What is love without the fear
of its possibility in the plenitude of power!

You lace your poetry
with snake venom and shake
empty spaces to raise
a large body of froth,
the frothier the better,
and you say

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you had to, because
venom is what the earth gave you
along with its salts and water.

Dear brothers, I wonder
why must you bother
about the earth
when its copper metaphors are all
You can handle in these hard times,
when the earth is getting slower
and the world on a trot so long
is getting faster.

Our worlds by reality
are different, true
but our earth is the same
by the light of metaphor.

It is metaphor that sustains faith
in things earthly and
it is this loss of metaphor
that brings crows to the entrails
of watermelons in the gutter.

I never lost my metaphor.
You know how
I lived for three centuries
by the strength of my metaphors alone
drinking their milk by the day
collecting by night their dung
for manure.

I thank you for the honour.

With Unni in Ernakulam

I gave Unni a ten-rupee note
and asked him to keep
his bloody mouth shut
that I was God

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and he was my little wart
on the stone face,

that this town swelling
inside a coconut shell
was our secret harvest.

Between us we shared
the gangrene of the sea
on a festering shore
and let the barracudas pass
noiselessly into the
backwater,
the Chinese nets hung like
massive beehives from cornices of
elemental houses for sometime
and then burst
releasing darts of sunlight
into some distant mirror.

It is love, said Unni
that keeps the secrets of
the sea-side town safe
and not greed,
for greed is a ten-rupee note.
God gives to his own little wart
and love is what the fish
keep for themselves from water
after giving to the earth.

Revolution

(Remembering JP)

Total revolution
is a cosmic affair Sir,
but what happened to our
little revolutions
waiting at the door?
No one opens the door
any more master

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You must be worried stiff
sitting on a charpoy
listening to
that impatient knock on
the heaven's door.

That is the fugitive of your courage
turned sleepwalker now
who strayed into
the heaven with
unused munitions in hand
waiting to be called in
and pampered, dying to be discovered.

That is the end of it Sir
Stay well, wherever you are.
They would remember you
certainly,
but would not open their door.

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K. Jayakumar

You Can't Exile Me

I never knew
that I was an alien
and not a citizen.

I never recognised
the invisible boundary
between you and me:

Until I was stopped
at the city gate for 'papers.'

I never could imagine
my words and woes were
always suspect.
Now I realize
why they always dispersed in a hurry
whenever I tried to join
their conversation.
Now I can recall:
They used to down the curtain,
stop the play and got up
as soon as I entered.
They used to feign sleep
when I knocked.
They never invited me
to their feasts and festivals.
The late-night dances always began
only after I had left.
They never shared with me

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their private jokes and privileged obscenities.
Of course some of them spoke
once in a while (may be out of pity)
about the whether and the headlines.

Now I recall
they never really listened
to the songs of my bleeding soul.
My anguish was to them
A traitor's pathetic pantomime.
Indifferent to my tears
they asked among themselves:
'Is he a fake or a spy,
or poetry's paramour?'

As the setting daylight dissolves
in the shadows
of the mud path,
and the swollen feet get bruised
and the eyesight blurs,
the final rituals of my exile were in progress.

But be sure of this:
The country that you want me repatriated
is really unknown to me.
Not a blade of grass recognizes me;
Nor a grave awaits me there.
I have never learnt
their rituals and customs.

Should I be exiled,
I have no place to go.

This is my country.
As much mine as
it is yours.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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As He Returned Victorious

As he returned victorious
with his booty and laurels,
the river and the mountain
uttered not a word.
Even the wind refused to recognise.
He awaited the judgement
like uprooted water weeds
on a summer's day.
His life breathed
in the smoky thread of
the burnt-out wick.
His glances sought solace
in the fall of an orphaned feather.
As he tried to speak
The tree shed its leaves
in an invisible fire.

Then the mountain spoke:
The peaks of your pleasures
and the valley-mists of your comforts
are a shame to us.
This valley cannot receive you;
this mountain cannot look at you.

The river said
As in a trance.
You have drowned, yourself
In the river of filth and hatred.
Defile not these waters
of the sad and the helpless.

The wind grumbled
You were sleeping on sinful beds
in chilled chambers.
This is the wind of the sleepless.
It can't touch you
who can't be woken up.

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After a menacing pause
They said in a chorus:

Doors of our memory are sealed.
Your sadness is but a tragic joke;
your face a pathetic mask.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

The Heart of a Glacier

The last winter made me a glacier.
Since then
the sky is a cold blue indifference.
And below, the valley scripts
a suicide note in alphabets of snow.

The scratch of a crooked ice axe
fails to invoke
a swish of blood-drop flowers.
The broken mud-pot fails to bleed.
The unexpected winter
has arrested the river.

I now dread sunlight;
lest it should melt me.
I now hate sunshine;
lest it should make me weep.

A glacier has no wish
but to be
only a glacier

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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The Street: A Collage

The street is a metaphor
of ignorance.
Where annihilation
is a cause for celebration.
It is a celebration of forgetfulness
and futile deceptions
where none really wins.
Nonetheless the match goes on
in waves of violence and conflict.
Streets are darts
that never reach the target;
it is a knowledge that deifies ignorance.

I am a helpless captive
in this dreamscape.
An amphibian washed ashore
by the tide of destiny.
A frightened water creature
that dreads the land;
a confused animal
scared of the sea.
Nothing more than
a pair of anguished eyes and ears.

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Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

The Town was in the Grip of the Epidemic

The town was in the grip of the epidemic.

It was the turn of the demon gods
with their seeds of sickness.
They blinded the painter;
muted the singer;
and disfigured the lover.
The sickness made
an indelible mark on my back too.

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Then on, my morning walks
looked like sly escapades.
On the windscreen of my car
they wrote dirty epithets.
In my mail box
they dropped vulgarities.
The slaughter yard of wild gossips
were home to crows and vultures.

In the city streets
sorcerers walked incognito.
with their ugly squint
they made love
look like lust
and simple lust
resemble perversion.
In words of praise
they could mix
the acid of ridicule.

The town was in the grip of the epidemic.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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Kilimanoor Madhu

The Plural Of Heart

While you were with me
I did not feel the sleepless
midnight in the soft frost of the deep sea.
This journey all alone—with the sky and sea,
these symptoms—
The symphony of sea sickness
the chain of similies that shudder the body
the static timepiece that cuts the blackwaters—
Yes, I have the typhoid of passionate love
shore – it is only a goal –
The Everest that shattered itself
On the coral reef—the thin flame
of the lamp post raises its hand
though with the broken head.
When you were with me
I did not notice all this
in the soft glow of frustration
and its high tension pressure
everything got settled like pots and pans
shivering and sharing, knowing all
The fishes on the shore
touching and moving off
muttering and grumbling
over the steep rocks—the dust of fishy smells
A mission to travel from
The stormy presence of time.
The salty taste in the words of the singer
This is a mission to be endured
when you were with me

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None of this was ever noticed
many a time I was even you.
In this bay of your absence
you have so many names now.
In the plurality of your heart
I have a mad urge
To smile and cry and do
a lot of thingh which the words could not express.
The sleepless eyes of the sailer
groping in the black current sees.
I who never used to dream
even in the cozy covered slumber
now witness great dreams keeping awake!
As seasons, seas and
skies and shores
as the sense hidden in
hundreds of words.
When you become the complete number
Of the heart—you open
the throbbing sea—where I can keep
The stars I plucked, the pearls I fetched.
In the naked chest you opened wide,
the throbbing sea.
In the frenzy of a holy dream vision
I sob and sigh—in which number of the heart
are you now?

Translated from Malayalam by Sudha Warier

The Name of Life

While writing the story
of one's life in a single line
sitting down to pen it
when idling without writing anything
what will you name life!

What to name it—
when

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in the sliding mischief of a hillside
somewhere in its lonely height
with the accompanying faint jingling
from the bony structure
of the unsteady pace of a
boy's breaking voice
that chases the slivers of truth
Torn out of the lazy lies of a folk-song—
shedding false layers of it
to make them move off
like fireflies to unknown spaces
what else can you name life!
When
the broken kite moves
on its own
following it
driving the chariot of words
straining to be the sun
wandering over the ups and downs
and the multicoloured carpet
of a beating dream glows
as the smile of the skies
what else can you name life!

When—
the time piece of the 'changing rose' plant
conveys the message
through the spittle on the wayside
and sheds the hours one by one
and the vast fields of Vandannoor
chant the holy hymns
in the slumbering afternoons
which evoke the rapport of souls
and the cottonstick in the golden lamp
spreads prosperity around
in the twilight shady valleys
what else can you name life!
While writing the story
of one's life in a single line
before writing
when you meditate on

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what to write
what will you name life!

The fragrant words that sharpen
the childhood within the pages of a text
where the peacock feather is
kept away from the sky—
and the magic of early scents
spreads in the twilight of peppara
flowering the late evening of
the hot and misty month of Makara
the sweet smells of adolescence
tin plants beside the ponds in full bloom—
the water birds—
the lingering fragrance of the screwpine
the hills taking bath in the pond—
What else can you name this life!

Falling in love—
the heady smell of ripe Mangoes
each night a poignant wound—
The words fanning the fire in the heart
giving it varied shades of enchantment—
and the multi meanings.
A boat nears the ghat of heart
the waves awaken
and points to the burning glow,
covered by the moonflower vine
quite nearby in full bloom
What will you name this life!

The words that voice the fright
the intense pain waiting in the shady lane
the long days on an arrowbed
form auspicious time to die—
The body that melts and shakes
falling asleep on oneself talking in sleep
the mutterings gaining sense and movement—
What else to name this life

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Confronting the meaningless waste!
The story of one's life—
in a single line.
Sitting down to write—
idling—unable to pen a word
Yearning to write
What will you name the life?

Having crossed the seven seas
not reaching anywhere
Talking nonsense to the waves
whiling the days and nights
repeating oneself all the time
when you see the glow of kindness
on the highland beyond the bay
What else can you name life!

The holes where the water bugs
lie sleepless, watching over
the murmering statistics of deaths
the sadness of medicines
the senseless magic of dreams
flowing by consuming drugs
the mass euphorea—a moving mob
in the unfamiliar gazes
the frenzy of a festival—
What else to name life!

The boxers in practice
storm and stutter
like loners in misery
The saddists in ecstacy
sit beside the stove scratching their skin
while the poison swallowed during the journey
ferments within, making
the life froth and foam
the costumed heroes,
the shadow kills
and the anniversary celebrations
of planned murder long accomplished
The immature aging

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of many a dear sorrow
The sacred sweet rice
that shorten the gravy of age
the million lamps of unholy deeds
performed along with
the ceremonial balancing
of jealousy at the temple front
What else to name life!

When
writing the story of one's life
in a single line
while sitting to write—
and write as a letter
What will you name life!

Translated from Malayalam by Sudha Warier

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Manoj Kumar Meher

For a Long Time

How many times in a year
do they come into our frontyard and wait:
Jhumru Majhi, Lekru Hans and Dhanu Nag.
However when they are here
I realize how familiar
I am with their intention.

So I keep entreating Ma all the time:
Destroy the cases of the pigeons,
who would need the paddy from all hundred acres?
A building has been let out on rent in the city,
and besides,
we have a thriving clothtrade here.
At festival times of *Nuakhai, Puspuni* and in the harvesting season,
if you are able to sell a pegion for five rupees more,
would this extra money help
in establishing a car industry?

But a Class Two Student that I am
my ears are boxed,
I stay away,
and for sometime
I am not permitted to buy candy.

Not just today,
but since I observed things,
I've been against this idea
of breeding pigeons for sale.
Still, what could I do?

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Father easily echoes Ma's words,
as he sits down rightaway
to list the prices
of the ploughman's gamchha,
the daily help's sari,
and my own balloons and kites.

Man, whatever he is, lives in want;
grieving for his own grammar of irrelevence,
he bursts forth with meaningful arguments
for his unending sorrow.
So all those
quietly treading my unconcerned world
are fugitives when at times I ask myself:
How truly innocent is a bird?

At the parting of a loved one,
isn't it wounded,
doesn't it seek revenge?
Doesn't the bloodied sun of rebellion
rise ever for its freedom?

One day
I opened all doors and understood,
here was deliverence.
The next day, however,
I found everything was just the same.

The night began to end,
life's transitory feelings
were making me restless,
and at that very instant
a terrible dream confronted me:
as though here
Jhumru Majhi, Lekru Hansa and Dhanu Nag's sons
were waiting in the courtyard
and I was selling pegions at seven rupees more
than the usual rate.

Translated from Oriya by Jayanta Mahapatra

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Introspection

The harvest over,
the trader measure out all the grain—
And now, only the wild pulses
left to ripen on the lower hill-slopes
are our hope a few weeks.

Then I was seven or eight.
To graze the cattle,
humming familiar ploughman songs,
to trap and catch hares and field mice
was my main goal; and besides,
I'd learnt from Father
the skill of laying snares for birds.

To pay the cost for the ritual-feast
for my dead Grandfather, Elder Sister's marriage,
and the cases we had to fight in the courts,
our ancestral house had already gone,
just a shack in the rice fields was our heaven,
the cooking fire was only lit
after Father returned from work
from the nearby town,
and life smouldered on
for half a line of dream.

So a day came when Father did not return.
Ma's radiant world suddenly became restless
in some unknown fear,
my footprints vanishing slowly
in my self-engrossed fulfilment.
Still, none of us took refuge
in that empty place that lies
behind the act of consoling oneself.

Nevertheless, Father returns;
but in the moment's melancholy,
in the horizon's sorrow,
he simply blames himself:
as though his empty hands

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waited eagerly to choke someone to death.
At times earth, eager in its blind ways,
turns the green earth ecstatic
in order to cleanse
one's inner being!
At the movement
seeing a blur in the distance,
I ran to him. Father
broke down then, hugging me,
as he slumped down on the ricefield's edge,
his eyes downcast, sobbing out a loud:
"Go on, watch out for any bird
that might be trapped in the nets.
Go, son. Grief has no meaning for us.
We have faced such situation often."

I walked over to the nets
and found a fledgling's life
in peril. What could I do?
As though nothing had happened,
I let the bird go free into the skies.

Translated from Oriya by Jayanta Mahapatra

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Parmanand Srivastava

1. A Place To Hide

Though I have been passing through that lane
but it happened only today that while passing through that same lane
in a rickshaw one hot afternoon
I awfully missed you Bhanu Majumdar,

I missed her on whose door
I knocked forty years back
on one such hot afternoon
when all the family members were fast asleep
which though a sleep
but seems as if, the one who awakes
feels, opening eyes after centuries!

loo was blowing
and feet were burning
As if they were dug in the sand

And it happened so that despite excessive heat
between your half, sleep and half-awakening
you provided me with that virgin touch
as cold like skin
which goes straight to one's soul
And changes everything.

In July 2003 where are you Bhanu!
Have you blossomed like a flower in a barren land
or lying pressed or hidden in an old book
like "Morpankhi" by no one remembered
Perhaps, when we met, years back

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nobody's around who witnessed those moments
except those touches in hurry
which often become public
in an effort to hide

And then, where to hide Bhanu
where!!!
and why!!!

Translated from Hindi by Seema Shafaque

2. Prior to Women Reservation

Before entering the Sheesh Mahal of an imaginary Begum
(let us call her) Mahak
a maid
whether young or middle-aged
wanted to attend nature's call
anywhere in open
close to some park
under the tree
any place you ask!

Alas! It is so tragic
in a country
in a free country
which has celebrated its golden jubilee two years back

There are places
which though allowed to men or animals
but prohibited to women
as those are not her fundamental rights
like this stupid work
of which even woman is not aware of
so how to tell
and to whom !!

Translated from Hindi by Seema Shafaque

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3. One Early Morning

A mother in her late thirties
Or to say prior to her forty
passed through the Tansen Marg
fast fast very fast
ahead ahead and ahead
as fast as she could afford to
forced by her dear silky-haired dog
Dog whose senses are strong enough
to recognize the smell as well as
touch of a woman
stunned I was to see
her child hardly three
incapable to walk fast
unaware of the ups and downs
was lying unnoticed on the road
as he could not meet the speed
of the mother and the dog
on their usual walks.

What a time it is!
What to speak of these walks
when one's very own are left behind
and dogs are seen with their raised collar
enjoying their first love.

Translated from Hindi by Seema Shafaque

4. The Roles

This was the first play
written, unwritten
Which I was supposed to direct too.

Even it was pre-decided that
'Asia Banu' would play the poet's daughter.
Daughter, totally shattered.

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The theatre's wall echoed with the applause.
Such was the presentation.
That was the day and today...
when all theatre personalities
are leaving gradually for Mumbai

At last, doing the same play
again and again.
Kal Kothri Mein Raat
a play related to the end of democracy.

It is a time when no one wishes to write.
About unspoken, untold love, after
Usne kaha tha

It seems as if no such role exists now
of her fading youth.
Time running on it's heel.
After *Uska Bachpan.*

Vandana!.... Where you are!!

The mobile is switched off.
And an endless silence....
Telephonic talk.....
The whole city has become mum out of fear

Am I going to write something you suffered!
Am I going to write your tragedy.

Handcuffs....and day's of mourning.

Vandana, actually it's me....who deserves to be
handcuffed

As it's me, who assigned you the roles.
Of Medha Patkar, Shabana or Arundhati Roy.
Once in my dream.

Translated from Hindi by Seema Shafaque

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Ramakanta Rath

Lovers at the Condolence Meeting

1.

"No, no, don't ask me
to be a speaker today,"
he said, and pulling a chair,
sat down in the very last row
of the meeting hall.

On his right cheek
a shaft of the afternoon sun
was packing its bags.
He looked, as though a page
after the last page of a book he had read
stood outside the meeting hall
and wanted to speak to him.

As long as the meeting lasted
he thought whatever he did
didn't amount to anything,
neither what he was ready to die for
nor the time that would surely come
after he was through with all his work.
When she left, she took away
all that she and he had lived for.

He then became
smaller and smaller,
wholly non-descript.

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After the last speaker had spoken
he rose and quietly
left the meeting hall.

2.

She was not asked to speak.

She sat in the fourth row,
on a chair close to the door.
She looked at the sky.
The sky didn't have a single cloud.
A single teardrop
was nowhere in her eyes.
All she saw,
both inside and outside
was empty, desolate.
She didn't hear
the voice she had known so long.
Whatever he would have said
had he found time and words
became an earthquake.
The years she had lived and the years she would live
rushed out in panic
out of their ruined houses.

They stood like beggars.
I, too, am a beggar woman.
What do I possess? Neither a single letter,
nor a single of his hopes and remorses
that had free passage
through my body's doors and windows,
neither our first coming-together
nor our very last parting
made up of wood, earth and
dying sunlight.

On her way back she thought she heard
someone sobbing and saying—
why did you go to that meeting?

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To hear others assuring you
I would never, never come back?

Lovers at the Railway Station

They sat on a bench
in the platform of the railway station.
They leaned on each other and,
when a train arrived,
moved away a little from each other.

A train arrived. For a short while,
there was some clamour,
people got off and boarded compartments.
The platform teemed with noisy vendors
of tea, pan, bidis and cigarettes.
When, a little later,
the train left, they again moved
close to each other.

They didn't see the railway tracks,
the platform, the iron grill
where the platform ended.
They thought where they stood was a foothill
on the banks of a gurgling hill-stream.
Clouds began to gather and,
from nowhere, a peacock descended.

They looked at each other.
One asked the other,
where should we go if it rains?
The other said, not only when it rains,
we'll be inside each other
always, as long as we live.

The one who had spoken first said,
you always run away from the everyday world
Tell me, after one of us leaves,
where would the other live?
They had not returned.

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A train had just come into the platform.
A bomb suddenly went off,
and the platform's roof over their bench
fell like a mountain of debris.

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Shafi Shauq

The Dropadi of Today

I remember
the initial throes and the horror,
changed into loathing
for them and the system
that is talked of and never seen,
and then for the flesh
that remained convulsing with each stroke.
Having kept aside their black horror,
one by one, all the five
hailed their vainglorious rigidity,
and repeated the ritual
till it was over done.

Then I was strangled
and left lying there, a dead abomination.

And now all the five
lie dead
each bearing volleys of bullets
in his hirsute chest.

The loathing
gradually
gets transformed
into compassion, nay, love
for these lumps of flesh
strewn there.

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In my wild lament
I weep
for the five brawny brothers,
nay my sons,
nay, my husbands.

The Bunker and the Bazaar

A sequel of breaths, and that is all,
one necessitating the other.
Outside these putrid sand-stuffed bags,
the perilous open...extending.
Janaki's seventh month is difficult,
Mataji needs a massage daily in the evening.
I had told them that I had to leave.
The barn was left un-cleansed.
The policy shall mature just after one year.
I shall write to them borrow a little more,
the field shall have cracked in the draught.
She shall be solitarily perspiring under the lone acacia,
What shall she do?
But oh, this open
outside the bunker,
yawning!
The *Rakhshas!*

Between the two putrid sand bags
two eyes staring through a rent, changing only the foci,
the shoulders, pain by the gravid bags,
pulses, potatoes, onion, and cabbages.
It shall be a shut down for five days, they say.
Time is precious.
I shall wriggle through the madding miscellany.
Here the gore of yesterday is still unwashed.
"No trampling over, please."

A mango-bite for little Dolly,
what shall she do confined at home, and without friends?
"Have you received your test-report?"
"Oh, forget about that,

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people lay their lives, we too have to bear a little."
A stir, there in the bunker.
A pack of cigarettes
and run home.

Kashmir

The light-footed and rose-lipped bloom,
Donald, denim, and Diana and the little skull,
and the roller-skates and the stuffed bag,
rugged to the little shoulders.

She walks
noiselessly
the noisy road,
in the full gaze of the uniformed gun-man.

Bang!!! Many fell, they say,
a hissing bullet (one out of the hundred of wanton bullets)
pierces the little skull.

Now a sixteen-year old decrepit,
or a sixty years' age packed in a sixteen-ear old frame,
is tottering on crutches the busy road,
in the full gaze
of the whiskered uniformed man.

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Subhakanta Behera

To Yashodhara

Today is your birthday
and you will be waiting for me
you will start wailing
after being tired of a tiresome search
on the blue waves of the sea and in the azure sky.

Dreaming a chain of sweet dreams
you will be in ecstasy
with perspectives of a bright future

But for me reign everywhere
the tyranny of unspeakable emptiness
The calmness of a still night
ascending of the Buddha on the being of Gautam
It is the truth, the only truth for me
in the evolving world my mortal being
true, chases you
But not with any carnal desire
rather in the image of an elderly Yashodhara
in the vision of an accomplished mother.

O My dear Yashodhara!
You are the woman, you are the mother
You are Nature
For you in this moving life
fullness and fulfillment.

Translated from Oriya by Premananda Panda

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Onlooker

When does spring come here?
A shiver of dazzling brightness runs through the dark cells?
Or the slumbering night straightens up?
I do not know.
Each day and night in a tinge
pass away before my eyes
in their scheduled way
I am only a mere onlooker
Walk along the plain road
just repeating an ugly incident.
While walking along the road
I meet everyday many fellow walkers
Both known and unknown, friends and foes
standing as usual as stupid ones
without having any reformation of their own
Since the day I set my foot on this place
(I do hardly reform myself)
I have been the same onlooker
all through my walking almost daily along this track.
One day this journey will come to an end.
I will have my reformation
Time and this place will no more belong to me
on that memorable day
But another onlooker
will have occupied my place.

Translated from Oriya by Premananda Panda

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Focus

Shashank Sitaram

Narayan*bab* lay silently on the easy chair, eyes closed, with his legs spread over the chair's arms, as if he had been put out to dry. He picked up the newspaper and wore his spectacles, but the words he read appeared meaningless. He got up from the easy chair, put on his slippers and stepped out. In front of the courtyard was an orchard. You could see the thinning fields and the green hills beyond the orchard. Narayan*bab* went and sat down at the edge of the fields.

A strong, cool breeze was blowing. He could see some empty cisterns lying about in the yard. Some children were excitedly playing games out in the fields. Small birds fluttered about the feet of the grazing cows. Narayan*bab* felt a great wave of relief wash over himself. That one thought kept going around his mind, like the pulley at the well's edge.

'Why did this ever happen? It could have been different. It should have been different. Why does it not happen? Look here, man is never what he seems, and it is right that things never happen the way we think. I had not thought this way about you...I am not upset with your rejection. The reason you gave me...that reason should never have been put forth. I cannot accept the argument that your parents could be the reason for your rejecting my Anu....I had different expectations from you. Your writings...your thoughts were reflected in your writings...your independent thinking was strongly visible in them. I would talk about plays, literature, with you...discuss them with you... I treated you as an equal. Why? I thought our thoughts met at some level... but now, I think your thoughts are as synthetic as a plastic model of Lord Ganesh...something one cannot worship...cannot accept.. One should not be dishonest with oneself.'

A few kites floated about dancing in the sky, when suddenly one of them came plummeting down in a spiral, then lifted itself out of that self-destructive path and hovered anew. Like the Kirkichar. 'Do you remember

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when Sudhakar had deserted his wife? How much I had admired your comments on that incident? "We are selfish. Very selfish. We cannot see suffering beyond our own, even if the other person's suffering was as large as a mountain. So Sudhakar left his wife...he left her because of the white patches on her body...does that mean that everyone in his family, including himself would ever be free of those patches? Can he guarantee that? What will he do then?" you spoke these words then. Now...Anu was acceptable to you until I mentioned about the patches on her body. Now you don't like her. Your parents don't like her. This always happens...should happen.'

Narayan*bab* laughed at himself.

'What does Anu lack? She has everything!'

He was not saddened by Anu being rejected...the sadness was different. The kites still fluttered in the sky. Some kites would rise quickly like monkeys climbing up coconut trees. Other kites would slowly float down. Narayan*bab* sat for long, watching the kites and wondered if it was not his mind up there in the sky.

Narayan*bab* had been on a tour for the last four days creating awareness among the public with his Abolish Superstition Programme. As was his wont, he was now sitting with the newspapers of the last four days and poring over each paper minutely. He found an article on his Abolish Superstition Programme in one of the dailies. "Shri Narayan Wagh, a retired teacher, has already made a name for himself as an actor and powerful director. And now he has been taking his play to schools and colleges. This fresh approach towards presenting a play leaves a deep impression upon the viewers not only for Narayan*bab's* devoted direction but also for the support he has garnered from the young cast.

"Narayan*bab* encouraged a viewpoint which was free of any religious interference and attempted the important chore of pushing superstition to the background through the medium of his play. He made his viewers think about a lot of things like oeganising yagnas to escape the wrath of the stars, wearing talismans to ward off evil, charting a schedule to abide by with the help of horoscopes, taking part in religious discourses by holy men to solve troubling issues, taking blessings of certain women who balance pictures of deities on their heads, accepting holy ash conjured up from thin air and using it to treat all ailments, consulting an oracle and depending on his predictions to take all decisions–these and other issues which were fooling believers were placed before students and people.

"The play is presented by a group of 15-16 boys and girls, with almost professional precision. It is a fantastic display of teamwork by these young people with an enchanting use of lights and sounds. The presentation of

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these issues is in the form of a play, convincing people about the evils of superstition. The play enacted every-day situations and explained how we get ourselves mired in more problems without solving the existing ones, through our blind faith in superstitious practices."

Narayan*bab*'s wife came out with a cup of tea, "Please have your tea first." "Huh!" replied Narayan*bab* without lifting his head from his paper. "Your tea will get cold." His wife sat silently for a while as Narayan*bab* did not move his gaze from the daily. Losing patience, she raised her voice slightly, "Please drink up first." As Narayan*bab* raised the cup to his lips, she asked, "How was the response to your play?"

Narayan*bab* replied with a grunt and was soon immersed in his reading once again. His wife could no longer control herself from broaching the topic, "That Yellama treats skin ailments." "Which Yellama?" asked Narayan*bab*, lowering his paper. "That one from the Gabit ward, who moves around with Devi Yellama." "Who has told you that?" "She had come here yesterday. When Anu went to offer kumkum, she told her that Devi Yellama was angry with her and was creating obstacles in her marriage."

"What else did she tell you?" "That Anu must have insulted Yellama without knowing it." "And who told you that?" "Anu herself. Once while she was playing, she had shouted at a Yellama carrying woman and asked her to go away. She was very small then. Those scars are from her fall at the same place." "What kind of goddess is that who bears a grudge against a child?" "Why do you always have to dispute such things?" "Then tell me how this Yellama found out about Anu's scars? They are not located where anyone could see and unless we tell somebody they would not know about them."

"Ok, we told her ourselves. The treatment would take two years." "I know that, dear. These people conjure up holy ash from thin air to take care of all ailments. And if that ash had any medicinal value, would you find any ailing person in this town?" "You do what you want then. If I tell you something I have to listen to all this. Why can't you accept some things in the name of religion?" Narayan*bab*'s wife left in a huff, "Girls our Anu's age have two-three children already. And you don't care. There were also these very fine proposals which you fouled up by revealing about the scars on your daughter's body. Who do you think you are? God's representative on this earth? Why did you have to go and tell them? And when I suggest that we should try some religious recourse to this problem, you refuse to budge. I'm sure if we had tried that, our daughter would have been happily married by now. Then you have your doctors. This is his doctor and that one somebody else's. How have the medicines helped us? Tell me.

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Herbs and roots! Have they helped? Why do you think herbs will help and not our God? Our Anu is no longer a child, you know."

For Narayan*bab*, this outburst from his wife was nothing new. This instrument played its tune at least twice every month. He would never blame her for the regular outbursts as he knew the pressures under which his wife went about her chores, but his failure to convince her about his point of view made him very uneasy. He went back to his newspaper.—15 killed in Punjab—4 terrorists arrested in Punjab—200 drowned in Bihar boat tragedy —status quo in the Iran-Iraq war—rape in Vasco, Youth held—suicide by unmarried girl. Yesterday, a 31-year-old spinster committed suicide by jumping into an unused well. She was a school teacher.

This was the girl's second attempt at suicide. The reason according to the public was the calling off of her impending marriage. Narayan*bab* laid the paper aside and removed his reading glasses. "How much longer do you want to wait? After all she's a girl.." these words crashed onto his ears. His thoughts scattered about his mind like a line of ants scatter when stamped upon. The girl from the newspaper filled his mind. She came down into the courtyard, like the unexpected uneasiness that followed. He crossed over to the fields and sat on the mud-dyke.

The kites soared about in the sky when suddenly one broke off and slowly glided to the ground. One boy, who was running following the path of the kite, finally managed to grab it. Narayan*bab* silently watched. The boy flew the kite, it fluttered up again; the kite fight began anew in the skies, it got cut and floated down. The whole action was repeated. The boy flew the kite again. It danced about again in the skies, got cut down again, and came floating drunkenly down to the ground. This time the boy did not move. He sat down where he was. Narayan*bab* watched from his perch.

The television set was on. The screen displayed an image of three sisters who had committed suicide by hanging themselves from the same ceiling fan. Having absorbed such a colossal tragedy, the stolid father was talking, "We had never in our wildest of dreams expected something this terrible to happen." The questions being asked were confusing, almost hostile and the answers were being delivered with equal animosity. "The practice of dowry was the real reason behind this tragedy. Besides that, there was something else too." "A 5000-year-old tradition." "Lack of co-ordination in parents' thoughts." "Lack of independent thought and self-confidence."

Though the point of view being expressed on television matched with Narayan*bab's* train of thought, he could not stop thinking about that father on television. He became nervous as if he himself were being asked questions in that fashion. "We had never in our wildest of dreams expected

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something this terrible to happen." These words kept falling upon his ear-drums as if someone was pelting stones at him.

A strange uneasiness began to trouble him. The father who appeared on television refused to leave him alone even the next day. "Did you watch that news programme on television last night?" He asked Anu, on purpose. "How reckless can people get? This is gross thoughtlessness. That such educated and cultured people should act in this manner is even more shocking. It was almost like they were doing their father a favour. What a shock it must have been to the poor father. Did you notice how stifled, suffocated he looked when he was talking?"

"These girls were educated and one of them was working. Moreover they were not even of marriageable age. Oh! I cannot even think straight."

"Father, it is not correct to comment on suicide. It is not possible for anyone but the person whose life is at stake to understand the pain and suffering they have to undergo before taking such a step."

Narayan*bab* now looked at Anu with suspicious eyes. "Remember that suicide is an un-thoughtful act, an act of cowardice. It can never be the solution to any problem. Only a person who has no cognizance of thought and duty would attempt such an act."

"You are right, Father. But that moment is such that a person would not be thinking about any consequences, having lost all control, rationality."

"Let it be for now, dear. Your mother was telling me about some Yellama who could cure your ailment." Narayan*bab* tried to get some feedback from Anu. "Yes Father..." Anu, whose lips had opened up like the mouth of a spring, paused, "Lots of people have benefited by that treatment.... She hid the enthusiasm from her voice at the last few words, like the spring water that stills when it flows into a pond. "She has asked me to come to her home in Gabi ward if I wished to begin the treatment." Anu said this after a long pause, without moving her gaze from her toes. Narayan*bab* did not comment, and continued breathing deeply.

Anu did not push the discussion further. Narayan*bab*, feeling suffocated, got up and sat outside on his seat. Anu will come to me tomorrow to discuss the Yellama issue. She will tell me about all the people who have gained from the treatment. She will request me to allow her to try the treatment. Narayan*bab* could foresee the inevitable future. 'Will I able to stop her at that time?' Narayan*bab* could not answer that question and became even more restless.

He started scouring the bench with a bent nail he had laid his hands on. After some time when he looked at the seat, he noticed these circles he had inscribed on the wood. Circles...focus...circumferences.... His vision

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was filled with circles, focus....My circle....Anu's circle. My focus is Anu. Anu's focus is her marriage. All circumferences intermingled. All with their own independent centres. Some small. Some big.

He began laughing at himself.

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

(Akademi Award-winning Short Story: 2003)

❑

Notes

bab : Sir

Kirkichar : a species of birds

Yellama : wandering holy person carrying the picture of Devi Yellama, begging for alms.

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King Under Threat

Ashokamitran

Two recent news items — unrelated to each other — reminded me of Vijaya Rao and Raghuram. American surgeons treating the actress Sridevi's mother had operated on the wrong part of her head. The other was about the chess match between Kasparov and a computer. Both news items made me feel as though forty years had vanished in an instant.

Before talking about humans, I must talk about a building called Kohinoor. The film company that I worked for operated from several separate buildings dispersed over an eleven-acre campus. If you drew a map of that eleven-acre spread, its perimeter would look like a camel sitting on the ground. Kohinoor was located on the camel's head.

Not every one of our company's buildings had a name. In fact, Kohinoor had not been built with a company's office in mind. It was a two-storied building with thick compound walls and somewhat small windows, suitable perhaps for housing a secluded zenana in a modern Indian city. After our boss bought Kohinoor, its rooms were crammed with bundles of old papers and books which had accumulated in the company's various departments. It is my guess that those bundles of paper were never again untied by anyone.

I was allotted the hall upstairs in Kohinoor building. If they had put my table in any of the other rooms, no human could have entered that room. The architect of Kohinoor could not have cared a whit for people who stretched their legs to lie down.

Since Kohinoor was located in a corner, without much human traffic, it had become a place to relax for many people in our company. One such person who came in for a daytime snooze beside those bundles of paper was Vijaya Rao. After having studied law in college, he was now an actor in our company on a monthly salary. As far as I knew, he was given a speaking-part only once in his entire career. In that film, the hero, after having

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lost all his wealth and money, would stand forlornly in front of a paan shop and beg the shopkeeper, "Aiya, could you give me Some water to drink?" Vijaya Rao was that shopkeeper. He had to say, "Go, go away." It was Vijaya Rao who looked pathetic in that scene.

Vijaya Rao made a lot of effort to become someone I looked upon favourably. He had to pass me on his way to the room where he usually had his nap. No matter how friendly his smile appeared to be, when I saw him I could only think of all the mendicant's roles he had played. One day, after he had gone in for the nap, I peeped into that room. Vijaya Rao was not napping that afternoon. He was playing chess with himself. "Why are you playing all by yourself? We can play in the hall, under the fan," I told him. From that day on, his daytime naps were a thing of the past.

My prowess at chess was surprising even to myself. After I had arbitrarily moved a piece, without any kind of plan or forethought, Vijaya Rao would say, as if broken-hearted, "What's left for me in this game?" and emit a deep sigh. After witnessing his agony for several days, I told him, "You go ahead with your nap, Vijaya Rao. I am fed up with playing chess."

"No, sir. I won't sleep a wink till I beat you."

The next time I played with him, I deliberately lost my queen and then played aimlessly for a while. After about fifteen moves, Vijaya Rao sighed. Worried, I asked him, "You're winning this time, aren't you?"

"Look here," he pointed: my bishop was in position to take his king. Neither of us had noticed this situation in time.

"Vijaya Rao, it's obvious that I can't play chess to save my life. That's why this kind of mistake happens whenever we play. Let's not play anymore," I told him.

"No, sir. I must beat you at least in one game. I'll bring Raghuram Sir along tomorrow."

"Who, Raghuram from Editing?"

"'Stores' Raghuram. He knows how to play chess. All three of us can play."

"Listen, you have work to do only when you put on make-up. But if I keep playing chess during working hours, our boss is apt to say, 'You can go home and play, boy,' and send me away."

"Not at all. How would anyone know about our chess game here in Kohinoor?"

"It's talk like this which lost us the Koh-i-noor, that queen of diamonds."

Vijaya Rao laughed. "Don't worry, sir. This Kohinoor won't be lost. And you won't go anywhere else, either."

"Who is this 'Stores' Raghuram, our boss's secretary's younger brother?"

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"Yes, yes. They put him in Stores after the secretary put in a word. Over there, nobody is allowed to do any work."

"Bindu Madhavan..."

"He is the only one there who can work. If the others take up anything, it will only lead to major confusion. Once, because of an error in the order sent by Raghuram, we received four tonnes of common pins, instead of four tins."

"A magician I know eats common pins."

"To eat up four tonnes of common pins, he would need to live for four hundred years."

Vijaya Rao even slept for an hour that afternoon; so confident was he of beating me the next day with Raghuram's help.

The next day, I had a sty in my eye. It took four days for the sty to ripen with pus and break, and for the eye to be restored to normal. I returned to the office, only to find Vijaya Rao and another person playing chess at my desk. Angrily, I asked him, "What's this, Vijaya Rao? Isn't there a time and a place for playing chess?"

He said with a laugh, "Lets see if you can beat Raghuram now."

"I have to attend to my work first. We can play later. Come by this afternoon."

* * *

Vijaya Rao and that other person with him turned up on the dot at two o'clock that afternoon. My boss's secretary resembled a string bean. As the secretary, he had adopted a silk jubba and zari veshti as his uniform. Raghuram wore a two-yard veshti and shirt, both washed and dried at home but never ironed. He also wore an unironed coat over his shirt. Anyone might want to ask why the coat was necessary. Raghuram was very thin. The coat fit him very tight and made him look even spindlier. Only a vow made on someone's deathbed could have compelled a man to wear a coat like that during Chennai's peak summer.

I was surprised to learn that Raghuram, too, had graduated in law. How did these people, so educated and learned, end up loitering around in a cinema company, not knowing what to do with their time? I played the same game with Raghuram as I did with Vijaya Rao. When it was my turn to make the eighteenth move, I faced a 'double check': my king was under threat from two sides.

"Did you see that?" crowed Vijaya Rao, as if he was the one who had done me in.

We started our game rather early the next day, at one o' clock. This

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time, Vijaya Rao started advising me, ostensibly to help me out. Although this annoyed me, I could not stop him. Game after game, Raghuram was showing me up as a ludicrously inept chess player.

Some chess game went on in my head all the time. My brute determination that I must somehow beat this Raghuram surprised me when I became aware of it. I had never seen even the lowliest employee in our company treating Raghuram with any respect. But what extraordinary genius resided in that man!

If I closed my eyes, only chessboard squares and pieces appeared inside my head. In one position, two pieces were poised to attack the queen and block the king with a knight; in another, my bishop and queen were simultaneously trapped and floundering. The chessboard itself — at various levels and from various angles — stretched, shrank, bent and folded upon itself. Pieces moved of their own volition. Suddenly they stood up to attention. While a lone piece rose upwards towards the sky, others sprouted legs like ants and crawled away. The sky itself turned into a gigantic chessboard; various planets and stars became chess pieces. Now and again, jet planes streaked across the sky with a deafening roar.

Black king and White king guffawed loudly, snarled, even cried plaintively from their injuries. The numberless permutations of a chess game came and went whenever I was half asleep or just drowsy. I found it impossible to forget myself and fall asleep. Wooden pieces, plastic pieces, ivory pieces and china pieces—they all pursued me relentlessly. Openings that were impossible to win against kept appearing in my reveries and dreams. Even so, I struggled when I played a real game, unable to recall any of them properly.

All the opening gambits I had thought up after considerable effort, forgetting rest and foregoing sleep, were easily countered by Raghuram, who reliably defeated me every time. Vijaya Rao was now completely outside my awareness. In a way, Raghuram, his stick-like limbs, and even the coat that tightly gripped his thin, cadaverous body, had slid away from my consciousness. Chess games and pieces had become my whole life and world.

The strange thing was: no sty erupted in my eyes anymore; my health was even better than usual; although I went without sleep for weeks on end, I attended office regularly, experiencing no fatigue or exhaustion at any time. I would finish my professional duties for the day in just half an hour and wait for Raghuram to arrive. As soon as he came in, without even exchanging pleasantries, I would arrange the chess pieces on the board. At a shop selling second-hand books, I had picked up a chess book that had details of a game Napoleon had played with an officer when he was under custody in

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Elba and of several games he had played later in Helena with the governor of that island. I memorized all the games in that book. I tried out moves from every one of them with Raghuram. Raghuram, however, drove Napoleon to retreat right at the outset, acting like some latter-day incarnation of Wellington. For all his triumphs, Raghuram played his game in a laid-back manner, chewing paan, talking about old times, and getting up every now and then to spit out betel juice from the upstairs veranda.

Holding my head in both hands, I would sit with my attention completely focussed on the chessboard, permitting nothing else to distract me. I would then lose in an extremely humiliating fashion. Having decided that the rest of my life would be spent solely in playing chess with Rahguram and losing, I lived with no thoughts for tomorrow. I could honour and accept my near and dear ones, family chores and professional duties, only insofar as they supported my chess playing. If someone had told me that my sole purpose in being born was to play chess with Raghuram, I would not have argued.

That this was not true became clear during the next round of downsizing in our company. My boss sent even his secretary home. The savings there-from would have been six or seven hundred rupees at the most. If the secretary himself was axed, how could his younger brother survive? Raghuram, too, was given the pink slip. Later, all junior artistes on a monthly salary, including Vijaya Rao, had to go home.

I couldn't even think of my working life without Vijaya Rao and Raghuram. What would I do from eleven in the morning till six in the evening? What could I do? Raghuram did not even drop by for a farewell visit. Why bother about farewell and welcome with a man who kept losing horribly in chess, he might have thought. However, Vijaya Rao did come in to say goodbye.

Kohinoor became the place where I wandered like a ghost during the day. The bundles of old papers and books surrounding me seemed like fellow-ghosts. There were no humans around to play chess with. For a day or two, I set up the pieces on the board and tried to play the game from both sides. Playing with Vijaya Rao seemed far better in comparison. After the downsizing, additional responsibilities came my way. In the alchemy that Time wrought, I extricated myself gradually from the invasive hold of chess playing.

* * *

A few more changes occurred in the next two months. Having developed distaste for cinema, I gave up my job. I lived in another city for a year. On Pongal that year, Tamils in that distant city celebrated 'Tamils Day' in a

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Marriage Hall. Screening of a recently made Tamil film was a highlight of the celebrations. Vijaya Rao was in the film. He had not climbed higher in life, it appeared. He was one of five or six patients who waited in a clinic for the doctor.

Within a month of my return to Madras, a face I saw in a shop seemed familiar. I should have said, the coat was familiar: Raghuram.

"Raghuram, Raghuram! How are you? You went away without even saying goodbye! Where are you now?"

Raghuram showed scant regard for my excitement at seeing him. It hardly seemed like he even recognized me.

I was unfazed, however. "Do you play chess these days? Whom do you play with?" I asked him.

"Chess?"

"Yes. Chess. Even with your eyes closed, you could make even champions and gladiators bite the dust."

"Yes, I used to play a little. My health is not so good now. Even my hearing is somewhat dull."

Only then did I realize that he was standing in a medical shop. No major changes were apparent in his body: still the same old string bean physique. But there was an unhealthy intensity in his face.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"I am being treated for TB for the past six months."

"You?"

"Yes. Initially, I was coughing every night. The doctor told me to bring an X-ray of my chest. When I did, he said it was a wonder that I was still alive. It seems one lung has totally collapsed."

"I feel terribly sad to hear this, Raghuram."

"A whole lot of pills everyday for the past six months. There's very little room in my stomach for food."

I did not laugh. I took his address down, telling him that I would meet him next week.

When I went to his house the following week, his elder brother told me that he had gone out to get a second X-ray done. Raghuram returned after seeing his doctor with the X-ray. There was doubt writ large on his face.

"Is it getting better?" I asked him.

"Better? The doctor says there's absolutely nothing wrong with me. He has asked for another X-ray."

The riddle was solved when the third X-ray was taken. The first X-ray was not Rahguram's. It belonged to someone else who had come to that X-ray clinic on the same day.

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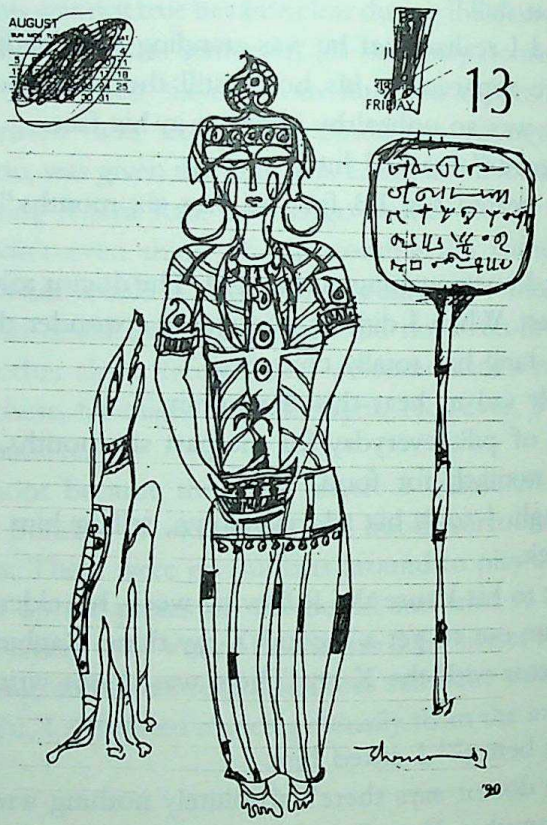
His worries over, Raghuram became cheerful. Putting a handful of superi into his mouth, he enthused, "Come, let's play a game."

I went later to the X-ray clinic to enquire about the other person. Records going back six months were no longer available. I wondered which doctor that person might have gone to. Whoever he went to, that doctor would have looked at his X-ray and told him that there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. With no further treatment, that person with a collapsed lung might have died within a week.

Translated from Tamil by N Kalyan Raman



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One Rainy Night

Bijoya Sawian

The woman watched the rain lashing against the window with that certain kind of aggression which always unsettled her. She poured herself another glass of' 'sohiong' wine and wished she had not refused her friend Laphisha's invitation to dinner.

She sipped the wine and let her eyes wander away to the opposite hillock where the lights of the houses shone like glow worms. An enchanting sight it was; reminiscent of her childhood days in Simla, now called Shimla.

How she loved Shimla where her father a Central Services Officer, was posted in the Department of Post and Telegraph. When he got posted back to Shillong she missed the place deeply. She was so young, only six, and could not even express her pain. It used to hurt her like a fresh wound and for months she used to get up in the middle of the night crying, sucking her thumb. She felt that same kind of hurt that evening and wondered why. Maybe because Eriklang, her son, had promised to be home early and he wasn't. She was missing him so much, her naughty, wayward child. How much she had looked forward to this Saturday so she could be with him, cook his favourite dishes and chat. How often did she see him during the week after all? She, busy with the work in the office and, he, with his college. She wondered why he didn't keep his promise and return home early. She felt an emptiness in the pit of the stomach and hugged herself tight, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Outside, the rain had suddenly walked away, so typical of Shillong, and only the wind was left to continue the nocturnal concert. The sound of a thousand crickets in the hedges pierced through the quiet. She got up quickly from her chair and put on her favourite Yanni tape. On the soft carpet she perfected a waltz with just a glass of warm wine

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in one hand and emptiness in the other.

* * *

Earlier she would miss her young husband, Arlang terribly. Cancer had claimed him three years ago leaving behind a huge void which she found difficult to fill. That was when she decided that Erik should do his graduation in Shillong. While her husband was struggling with his illness, she had tried her best to nip her daughter Klarisa's romance in the bud. Her beau was a doctor in England, a Khasi all right and he belonged to the same church but he lived thousands of miles away. She failed miserably. Three months before her husband expired, Klarisa got married to Paul Khongwir and went away. Arlang was of course, ecstatic about the match and, in spite of his illness, looked happy and handsome at the wedding. He always admired professionals and the thought of his daughter living in postcard perfect England cheered him. In that she found great comfort.

Erik seemed happy and settled in the beginning. But not for long. A few months after he joined college he stopped communicating with his friends who were in school with him in Himachal. They would phone him and bombard him with e-mails and the girls with cards but he sent no replies. She tried so hard to encourage Erik to keep in touch but he was resolute in his decision, to keep them out of his life. Along with that came the late nights, the late, late nights and the occasional night out. She had thrown three parties for him and did her utmost to make his new friends comfortable. She found them a little scruffy but that didn't prevent her from taking out her best glasses and crockery and keeping up with the times' provided two bottles of Smirn Off as well, on his last birthday. The following morning she got up at dawn before her daily help arrived to empty the ashtrays, wash the glasses, throw away the cartons of Real Juice and hide the empty bottles. As the room settled back into shape it suddenly struck her that Erik's three non-tribal friends, Sujoy Mitra, Bobby Singh and Rithik Goswami, had stopped telephoning and, at the party, were conspicuous by their absence. When she went in to greet the boys before the party began she noticed that. She searched for them because she was fond of them. She stood rooted in the middle of the room, hugging an unplaced cushion and decided that she would find out from Erik the following morning. But when the time came she forgot.

She felt sheepish clearing up the remains of the party but she certainly didn't want Bani the maid to spread stories about Erik and his

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lenient mother. She didn't think she was lenient, leave alone over indulgent. She just had a special feeling for Erik because he had been a sickly child and she and Erik were both October born. During his first four years his tummy gave constant trouble. The doctor, a bespectacled Bengali pediatrician, became her best friend and confidante simply because she met her so often and grew to depend on her for almost everything. Dr. Anjali Bose was not only a medical person but a natural psychologist, cook par excellence, an enthusiastic gardener and widely travelled. Her favourite hill-station was Shimla!

When Erik turned eleven he was packed off to a boarding school in the Shimla hills. She cried all the way there, secretly of course while Joshua and Anjali diverted and entertained Erik on the drive down to Guwahati, in the plane to Delhi and the train to Kalka, so full of memories.

Erik settled in very well and finished school as Games Captain and topped the class in Geography and Botany. He would comfortably have got admission in a Delhi College. Those two months after his school leaving results came out were simply terrible because for once she was compelled to make an outright selfish decision. It felt strange like being draped in an alien costume that revealed all the wrong parts of her body. But she was lonely and insecure and wanted desperately for at least one family member to be with her. So she didn't let him apply for admission outside Shillong.

* * *

Outside, the wind kept moaning around the house and rustling the leaves in the trees. Why wasn't Erik home? She cried out the question to the wind that moaned around the house and rustled the leaves in the trees but she got no answer. For Nature there are no questions and no answers. Everything just is, complete in itself, from the beginning of Time, till the end.

* * *

Erik had got up late in the morning, sipping his tea with eyes closed, letting the sun soak in all over his body. Then she watched him go upstairs again to his room to wash and change. She waited outside wearing her sweetest smile and asked him where he was going since it was Saturday and college was closed. He stopped when he heard her question and turned towards her, eyes narrowing and uttered just one

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word 'Why?' She was so startled by the response that she offered no answer but simply sat on the garden bench under the chestnut tree, her eyes smarting. She looked up at the sky; the colour reminded her of a single scene in a village near Sarahan not far from Shimla. A little cottage by the roadside fronted by rows and rows of cornflowers still and poised in the morning light. She couldn't stop awhile as she had wished because there were too many people in the car. The scene was, however, imprinted indelibly in her mind. She relived the memory and gained some strength as she watched her son driving off in the Maruti, without once looking back.

Confused and desolate, she found herself walking up to his room. She inhaled the fragrance of the after shave that still lingered in the air and opened the window. It was a west-facing room so the noon sun had just arrived, streaming in strong and bright like butterscotch. She made his bed stroking the sheets, hugging the pillows and laying the quilt gently on the bed as if Erik was lying on it, a child still. As she lifted the bedcover from the chair a sweater fell out and slid down onto the floor. She picked it up, and dusted it several times in front of the window then she buried her face in it to ascertain from the smell if it was ready for a wash. It was a habit of hers that always used to make Arlang laugh. She smiled as she folded the sweater to be kept away in the drawer.

The chest of drawers of polished dark wood and brass knobs was a wedding gift from her grandmother. Her mother had bought it from an English family who left Shillong to return to England during the Second World War. She automatically tried to open the last drawer, woollens and shawls were always kept in the last drawer for some reason. Much to her surprise she found she couldn't open it. She put the sweater on the chair, sat down on the carpet and pulled hard, as hard as she could but the drawer wouldn't open. It wasn't stubborn, it wasn't jammed, it was quite simply locked. The drawer never had a key although provision was always there for a locking system. Why did Erik get it done and when?

* * *

Outside, the wind had ceased and she opened the window and breathed in deeply the exhilirating aroma of wet earth after a shower. She kept on inhaling releasing all the tension within her with every breath. For a long time she just stared and stared at the star-spangled sky, inky black like a sequined gown she once wore at a ball in a Calcutta club. It was

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then that Erik was conceived, in a suite at the Kenilworth, her favourite hotel, on that magical, wine-drenched night.

It was almost ten. Erik was nowhere in sight, not even a phone call. Where was he? Why was he so curt in the morning? Why, why was that one drawer locked? She popped some pine nuts, sent by Klarissa, into her mouth and munching noisily, she climbed upstairs to her son's room.

Of course she felt funny. She felt like a pryer and she was. She felt ashamed and bit her lower lip thinking, as her legs kept ascending up the wooden staircase, steadily. The room was dark and she groped for the switch which the electrician had placed in an inconvenient corner, too close to the inbuilt cupboard. The lights flooded the room spreading on the Fab India bedcover of grey and blue and climbing up the walls coloured with posters of Bon Jovi, Mariah Carey and a startling black and white sketch of the enigmatic Che Guevera.

She yanked at the drawer once, twice but it resisted her valiant effort. She sat on the carpet and felt a sudden shooting pain in her stomach. She doubled up and sobbed, missing her husband terribly. In her mind she cried out, "Ar, Ar, Ar please help me. What is happening Arlang?" She knew there was something seriously wrong. The drawer did not contain just drinks and drugs and pornographic delights—expected of wayward teenagers. Erik was definitely not alcoholic and too healthy and pink-cheeked to be on drugs.

There was one drawer that she hadn't touched that morning, the top most. It was so tidy and clean, the shirts and 'T' shirts folded and so neatly heaped that she left it as it was. She had only settled the second drawer where sweaters and pullovers had been shoved in haphazardly, barely making enough space for the one she found on the chair outside.

The top drawer opened very easily. She stared at the contents and winced. In the morning, in the hurry, she didn't notice the old shirts and 'T' shirts of Erik's schooldays kept separately in the left side heap. Casual ones in the middle heap and the very stylish, designer collection on the right. She looked at them lying innocently like slumbering babes and wondered what on earth she was doing there. Yet the sight of the grey and dark blue sweat-shirt with 'Games Captain' emblazoned on the front made her heart wrench and her eyes moist. She stretched her hand and bending down a little she pulled it out. Some thing small and shiny clattered unto the ground. It was a key.

The drawer didn't open all that easily because of the dampness. It gaped a little at an angle, slantingly like someone looking at you askance. As she kept closing and opening till it opened straight, her heart

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thumped and her head began to spin. At last it relented and slid out, gaping wide to reveal an AK 47 lying languidly like a sleeping reptile, amidst cartridges and Chinese-made smaller weapons. She gasped and recoiled with horror.

Scenes flashed across her mind in quick succession. Each shot confirmed forever that those late nights and nights out and Erik's withdrawal and distancing himself from her and his old friends were not, as she had thought, innocent and natural. One memory which she had flung far far away into the furthest recesses of her mind came back, rising from the deeps. One autumn night when she was about to fall asleep after watching a late night movie she heard Erik returning from his friends' house. She was very relieved because there was a curfew on. She remembered it was autumn because she had started using her quilt and what she heard next made her sit up. The water in Erik's bathroom was running abundantly. He was bathing and also washing some clothes. It was 1 am and no one bathed in Shillong at 1 am....

In the morning when the maid came to wash and clean, Erik was still fast asleep. She instructed the maid to start with the washing and she tiptoed into her son's room. In a bucket she found the clothes he had worn the previous day — a pair of blue jeans, a long-sleeved blue and white check shirt, white cotton socks and under-wear — washed and rinsed. She took the bucket out and decided that she would rinse the clothes once more and then hang them out herself. "I am being a good mummy," she sang to herself as if there was nothing to worry about and all was well with the world. She continued to hum quietly as she went about her chore. She continued to hum till the time she had to peg on the shirt—for, as she held it against the sun small splotches of yellow stains were visible. She knew, she knew that just as curry stains turned red, blood stains turned yellow. With hands cold and trembling she shoved the shirt into an old plastic bag and hid it behind her shoe rack. "He has hurt himself somewhere but I won't wake him up till I get back from office," she told herself firmly, taking deep breaths to steady her nerves and that was exactly what she did.

There was one thing about offices—they take you away to a different world where domestic problems and other personal problems are totally submerged under hundreds of files, steaming cups of tea and the incessant chatter of mindless minds. That was what happened actually. By the time she got home, the night before, was so distant it seemed that it never was it never happened. Erik was watching a one day international with his friends. There was so much laughter and glee in the air. She dug out the packet from under the shoe rack and flung

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it into the rubbish pit, at the edge of the garden below the old oak tree. Then she changed into a kaftan and sank into her favourite chair reminiscing about a row of cornflowers dancing in the northern light, faraway, long ago.

She remembered it all.

* * *

"Why my son, why?" she whispered, her eyes roaming all over the room resting on every single object of her child's. "Do you understand what this is all about, do you believe in all this...or is it just because you want to be accepted? Oh God Erik, my child, you did always have this problem, didn't you? Erik, have I failed you somehow, somewhere? Please come back soon my child and at least tell me.... All you have to do is tell me....We'll...we'll work it out...we'll..."

Just then the phone rang. She picked up the extension upstairs, next to Erik's room. "Good Evening, madam I am speaking from the police station....some accomplices of militants have been..."

The phone dropped from her hand and dangled like a severed head jerking piteously. Devastated, she collapsed on the floor and wept. She knew she would never get her answers.

The rain began to pour again in sheets and sheets of grey. Along with it the wind returned and both these gentle giants of Nature held this house of sorrow in their arms.

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Between Thieves

Mridula Garg

There was a thief of modest but well-deserved fame. His name was Shaatir. What is there in a name? It could be anything.

Now Shaatir, like the pucca Sahibs, was a pucca thief. He never let go his principles, whatever they were. This never-let-going of principles is a mark of the pucca Sahiblog. They never bother themselves with checking the what and the why of principles. Principles are principles, to stick to like a limpet.

To get back to Shaatir. One night, he went to the haveli of *Dhanna seth* to commit a theft. He broke into the house. His principle was to enter a house by breaking in and leave by the front door, after stealing the goods. He was a master of the art of breaking in. The pucca Sahibs who made an art of breaking into India, that is Bharat, couldn't hold a candle to him. Shaatir, as his name suggests, was real crafty. He could twist and turn his body to pass through impossibly small openings with the ease of a vermin. On entering the house, he was greeted by a beauty languidly reclining in bed, reading. How beautiful was she? Who knows. A woman is always a beauty, that's Bhartiya tradition, isn't it? Even a dacoit, if female, is called a dasyu sundari. Walking on cat's paws was a part of Shaatir's profession. He watched the woman in bed as she read on, undisturbed. She may have been absorbed in the book, but she sure was awake. The opening of the almirahs could definitely startle her. She could raise an alarm! Shaatir weighed the pros and cons—should he come another day? But, that called for consideration. If the beauty was alone in bed way past midnight, she must be home alone. Should he leave because he was queasy about facing a lone woman? But pucca thieves are never queasy. (Principle-No.2).

So he gave the almirahs a kid glove treatment; got them ajar with minimal sound. He wrapped the money, jewellery, silverware, and expensive clothes, properly in small bundles. He then put them in a large sack. Slinging

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it across his back he prepared to leave. Passing through the boudoir, he couldn't help steal a glance at the woman. What man could? The Sundari was still reading her book. Shaatir, though not a Greek god, wasn't an eye-sore either. The woman perhaps deaf, wasn't blind. Or was she? He cleared his throat. The inevitable happened. The beauty raised her eyes from the book. He waited for her to look scared. To expect a woman like her to scream was a bit too much but surely she would turn pale. That wasn't asking for the moon! The beauty glanced up and returned to the book. As if he was a mound of dirty linen, than a dark and handsome male! How could she? How dare she?

"I am Shaatir," he spoke aloud. "I am taking your precious things away. Come and shut the main door."

"Please bolt it," the woman said as she continued to read.

What a woman! Shaatir felt bitterly humiliated. "How can you not turn a hair with a strange man close to your bed," he asked.

"Man!" The beauty's laughter was acid.

"May I know what it is you find so entertaining?" Shaatir inquired loftily. In his vocation, days were gaping holed between nights of work. Movies were good fillers (hence the lofty dialogue).

"You break into the house of a lone woman and call yourself a man."

"Lone woman? Sorry, I was told this is the mansion of Dhanna Seth. You two split or what?" This new trend rode rough on principles.

"Seth is away on business. He returns day after tomorrow," the beauty yawned and continued to read.

Hopping mad, Shaatir threw the sack down, "Here's your stuff. I'll return the day after to take it when your husband is home. Let him stop me if he can!" He shouted theatrically.

"Ok, day after tomorrow then."

"Now, come and close the door," Shaatir's voice was back to normal.

"Just kick it shut."

"And if someone were to come in..." Shaatir couldn't help asking.

The woman's tinkling laugh was enough to shatter glass, "You scared of thieves?" she said.

"He could be an unprincipled bad character," Said Shaatir, "You are a young woman. Had it been my wife...." Good grief what was he going to tell his wife, when he arrived empty-handed? This shameless hussy...-what was she saying now?

"Go back through the hole you came in from."

"What hole?"

"The one you cut in the wall."

"How do you know about that?"

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"I have rather sharp ears." She looked down in sudden coyness.

Shaatir forgot his lineage and swore like a plebian, "I am a pucca thief, understand? I don't go back through holes. Now get up and close the door, or else..."

Thank God, for small mercies she did not ask or else what?

She smiled (She didn't laugh), picked up her scented hanky, pressed it between the leaves of the book, stretched her lissom body like a cat and rose. She walked swathed in a mist of fragrance. Shaatir stood riveted to the spot but somehow managed to pull himself up and run out of the main door, towards his family home.

You can imagine how Shaatir spent the next two days. The wife with a yard long face. The children eager to see the loot, sound slapped. The home resounding with their wails. The wife making no effort to stop the howling. Shaatir's anger at the beauty raged as by morning, he saw the light —he had made a priceless ass of himself. He imagined himself to be a master thief — from a long line of experts — and here he was, acting like a typical love sick hero of the movies. He should have given the book-loving hussy a one-way ticket to hell and gone about his business. But no, he had to belt out lofty dialogues. So roll in ashes and grovel at the wife's feet. Served him right, the big hero. One way out was to go back, brave the contempt of the snooty woman, and bring the stuff home. He could then win back conjugal favour. But he couldn't bring himself to do that.

It took a goodish dose of patience to wait till the third night. Fortunately time passes with or without patience. On the third night, Shaatir found himself again in front of Dhanna seth's haveli. As a rule, he chose the time between midnight and dawn for his expeditions but he simply couldn't wait that long. The wise men have said, the closer the goal, the greater our impatience. That may not be a principle but a saying, but sometimes sayings are as binding as principles.

So, in the early hours of the night, Shaatir, the thief, arrived at the mansion of Dhanna seth. He was shocked to see the hole he had made two nights ago still there in the wall. Dear God, these lazy bags of bones couldn't even get the hole plugged. It gaped wide, an open invitation to one and all to come in. Had these people no concern for the safety of their home? Naturally not, if the mistress of the mansion (MOM) is in bed reading, why should the servants bother? The master travelling on business, MOM in bed, servants at the hooch joint, the lazy shirkers. Let them all go jump in the river, why should Shaatir waste time over it? He was there to break into the house, so let him break in. The old hole lay inviting him.

But wait, wasn't entering through an old hole akin to eating dead flesh? A lion never eats what he hasn't killed himself. Ah, but this was his own

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prey, he had cut the hole himself, that the bastards hadn't bothered to repair. Bother! Should he enter through it or not ? Should he cut a fresh hole? He tried a guess at the family principles. A check yielded precious nothing. What else? Who could have imagined such a bizarre situation? What the hell! He kicked hard at the beautifully executed cut out and entered through it. Quite a domestic scene awaited him, the Seth eating his dinner, MOM serving the food. With a gaping hole outside!

"Couldn't you get that hole in the wall bricked up!" His authoritative voice called out as if he was the master of the house.

"What hole?" The Seth's hand flew to his waist. Aha, so, the cash was stashed there!

"This is Shaatir." The beauty did the honours.

"I am a thief, not your bloody boyfriend to be introduced," growled Shaatir.

"Th-ie-f-f–", Shaatir loved the sight of Seth's ashen face and horror-stricken eyes. With a jangle, a bunch of keys fell at his feet. Seth's tongue failed him but his eyes pleaded eloquently. Shaatir was well-versed in reading beseeching eyes.

"Keep the keys," he grinned, "I picked the stuff two nights ago. There was no man around, so I had to wait. On principles I don't rob women."

"Where are the servants?" Seth whispered.

"No whispering!" Shaatir ordered, "Speak loud and clear."

Seth tried to speak but the beauty's tinkling voice intervened, "Should I get you some kheer," she asked.

"I am on duty," Shaatir said impulsively.

Laughing, she touched her ears in a flirtish gesture, "Oh dear, I quite forgot to ask you," She included Shaatir in her coy glance. "Shall I bring some for both of you?"

Comforted by his wife's coquettery, the Seth managed to find his voice. "Please, darling, do. Your kheer is ambrosia fit for the gods." He turned to Shaatir, "I bet you have never tasted kheer like it before."

The woman went in to fetch it. The next instant Seth was on his feet imploring "Collect your stuff and vanish. If she finds you here, I have had it."

"We are the Shaatirs, we don't run," Shaatir declaimed.

"Then how do you go out?"

"Leisurely through the front door, a proud and honourable exit."

"Exit then but double quick. Pick the stuff and go."

"You won't stop me?"

"Do I look crazy? But be quick. Consider it a favour to me."

"I am a thief, not a politician to be doling out favours."

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"Ask and it's yours. Take a hafta if you wish."

"Do I look like a policewallah to you, I am an honourable thief."

"A monthly installment then. Think of it, a regular income." Seth's voice was thick with conspiracy, "Tell your wife you stole it."

"I am not a liar; nor am I scared of my wife, I am Shaatir." He declaimed filmy stuff again.

Before the Seth could say anything, the beauty returned with two bowls of fragrant kheer. She offered the first bowl to Shaatir. "Enjoy it and don't trouble your conscience—it has not salt."

"What if it has poison?" Shaatir sparred but accepted the bowl anyway.

Hope dawned on the seth's face, then vanished. How could such a principled virago poison anyone?

Shaatir was of the same mind. He did full justice to the tempting fare. His wife had taken out her anger on the food. The beauty's kheer a welcome respite — he licked the bowl clean.

The Seth couldn't bring himself to eat. He watched Shaatir slurping the kheer and weakly coaxed the beauty to taste some.

"When you bring the stuff back, we will eat kheer together," she said and turned to Shaatir, "Are you finished?"

"Make no mistake, your kheer hasn't changed my intentions." He went in and returned in a jiffy with the sack full of loot, "Here I go. Stop me if you are man enough."

"Heera! Raamoo!! Lakhanva!!!" The Seth called out.

"Everyone is on leave," the beauty informed him. "The contest is between you two. Hurry or you will miss him."

Shaatir's slowed down once outside the mansion. He could have sprinted home but the kheer sat heavy on his belly. Also, he couldn't resist listening to their talk. Hearing the sound of hurrying feet, he ran again. After covering a safe distance, he turned to survey the field. The Seth waddled quite a distance away. Poor seth, how could he hope to compete with Shaatir? Shaatir burped and swaggered at a slower pace, as much for the sake of his full belly as for effect. He walked on immersed in happy thoughts of fragrant bowls of saffron-perfumed, almond-enriched kheer, when the Seth sprinted like a vampire and caught him by the waist!

A piercing shriek shattered the night's silence. "Snatch the sack from him." Ordered the beauty from the roof of the house, beating the air with a whip. He tried to push the seth off, who whimpered, "Please don't hit me."

Shaatir's hand fell on the wad of currency stashed in the seth's waist-band. In a trice, seth understood. He whined, "Take the cash. This time I

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made quite a killing. Its all yours, just return our stuff. Not here though, there where she can't see us." The Seth kept up the pretence of grappling with him all the time he was speaking.

They reached the street corner. The Seth's perfumed sweat ran down his soft body in rivulets. Shaatir's head swam with intoxication.

"Ninny," he spat the word, "Scared of a woman. What if I take the cash and not return the stuff?"

Seth's eyes shone with cunning, "You are an honourable thief, aren't you? Think of your principles."

Indeed his ancestral principles did dictate that the males of the clan stay away from underhand dealings. But what should he do? Take the cash? Run with the stuff?

That brief dilemma-filled moment of inaction proved his undoing. The woman rushed towards him yelling her lungs out.

This was adharma, complete and total. Having provoked the males to go to war, the women of the golden past used to sit at home enjoying the sight of blood and gore from a distance, waiting to garland the victor. But a woman waving her own flag and jumping into the actual fray, that was not done!

Shaatir grabbed the cash, only to lose the sack off his back. Seth had nothing to do with it. The shrieks of the beauty had brought quite a crowd to the street. Eager hands grabbed the sack. The frantic pulling and pushing by the people scattered the loot on the street. The ensuing grab and run could have put seasoned dacoits to shame. Folks grabbed whatever they could, then staked their lives to snatch the next man's loot.

Shaatir pocketed the cash and ran for dear life. The beauty followed in hot pursuit, dragging her man along. The two presented the very picture of racing Ardhnarishwara, a juggernauting Yin and Yang.

Shaatir ran faster and faster, till he vaulted onto the roof of a house. He progressed homewards jumping from roof to roof.

Let the Seth catch him now!

Oh my! The beauty was close on his heel jumping over roofs, carrying the Seth on her shoulder. Holy Mother, what blasphemy! Was the woman possessed by the crazed shakti? Invoking the various mother goddesses and promising them all sorts of gifts and penances in return for his safe arrival at home, Shaatir reached the last roof.

As he prepared to jump, the Seth caught hold of his ears. Shaatir tried to stop his fall by bending backward but a vicious kick on the butt sent him hurtling down to the street, where he lay bleeding and earless.

His ears lay in the vice-like grip of the Seth.

The Rest is History.

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Shaatir had snatched a hefty sum from the Seth, so he had himself treated at a posh hospital. But he continued to be earless. To escape wagging tongues, he migrated to another city and took to wearing a turban. This served a dual purpose; he could hide his deformity and add a touch of class to his personality. He was accepted by the gentry and named the Pugridar (the turbanator) in his adopted town. He took to trade and did quite well, thank you.

The Seth was the one who benefited the most. He became famous as the man who had ripped off the ears of the infamous Shaatir; the Macho of the Machos. The beauty's fame spread far and wide. Not for giving hot chase to the thief, not for carrying her man on her shoulders over the roofs of the town, not even for pushing him off the parapet. Actually, no one had seen her do that. The eyewitnesses were busy grabbing the loot. Her fame spread because of the statement she issued to he media, front-paged by all the newspapers and magazines. She declared that however liberated, progressive and feminist a woman may be, she respected a man with physical prowess. A man with a capital M. Like her Seth karnaveer or breaker of eardrums.

Translated from Hindi by Madhu B. Joshi

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The Bazaar

Paramita Satpathy

"Hey, is it stale or fresh?"

"Absolutely fresh, sir. It has arrived just now. Can't you see for yourself?" He lifted the gills of the fish and continued, "This fish is from the Padma River, not any ordinary fish."

"Why, it does not look that red. Does not seem so fresh."

"Hilsa gills don't look red, sir; this fish is not reared artificially with steroid injections. It is a pure Padma product. That is why its gills are brown. The browner the gills the fresher the fish is."

"Okay, okay, now you tell me the price. I know you will quote very high now."

"Sir, it will cost you exactly two hundred rupees per kilo."

"What! Two hundred rupees? Is it fish or gold?"

"Sir, is it too steep for such good quality fish? Why don't you go and search in the entire market, you won't find this quality. I can guarantee that. This is the going market rate now."

Sanjay lost the battle at this stage. Really, what did he know about market prices? Only this morning he had felt the urge for hilsa curry and had come out to buy the fish himself. Otherwise, his peon handles all that. Meera keeps the account. His job ends when he hands over his pay packet to her every month to run the household. At times he asks for accounts. Take, for instance, only yesterday, when Meera asked him for five/six thousand rupees extra beyond the budget on the twelfth day of the month. Sanjay questioned her. Sanjay noticed that there were twenty five entries in place of five, in the list of expenses.

Meera silenced him sharply and retorted: "Do you have any idea how prices have gone up in recent months? You are relieved by handing me the money every month. That is all. What do you think? Have you any idea how I run the household? You get your tea and breakfast in time. You are

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getting your lunch at your office being sent to you in a hot case. Your friends and relatives are pouring in here all the time. You act as if you are staying in a hotel. You think I don't know that Manjit Desai had come and given you Rs. 20,000 yesterday? Can't you give me a part of that amount? You can give me at least four thousand rupees, can't you? You are blaming me! Now you run the household. I am fed up."

Sanjay was repenting. Why did he intrude into her zone and ask her for the account. Money comes and is being spent. Why did he invite such abuse from her?

But it is advisable to overcome that feeling of defeat. He had to buy the hilsa.

"Okay, okay, now give me the fish for Rs. 175. I know you won't lower the price any further. How much does it weigh?"

"Sir, I will weigh it in a minute." After weighing, the fish vendor declared, "It is two kilos and 100 grams. You have to pay Rs. 420 only, not a single paisa less than that."

"It is two kilograms. Why did you add 100 grams extra? If you are selling the fish for Rs. 175, I will take the fish, otherwise I will go elsewhere. One fish costing three hundred and fifty rupees? It is too high for my pocket."

"No sir, I can't take less than four hundred rupees," the vendor removed the fish from the weighing machine and placed it in its place squatting quietly with an indifferent face as if he was not interested in selling the fish to Sanjay.

"Alright then, don't give," Sanjay walked away in a huff.

"Okay sir, I agree to settle for Rs. 190 per kilo but that is the lowest. If it suits you, okay, or else leave it," the fish vendor shouted out after him. Sanjay could hardly suppress a smile. He knew the trick of bargaining. He had not forgotten the art as yet!

"No, I will pay exactly Rs. 175, not more than that." Sanjay shot back.

"Sir, I have lowered the price to one hundred and ninety rupees. I wouldn't have done it for anybody else. Since you are my first customer today....", he turned his face to attend to another customer and began weighing 250 gm of Mahurali (minnow) fish. But he was still studying Sanjay's response.

Sanjay halted a little reluctantly. He was ready to pay Rs. 350 for the whole fish. But the idiot of a fish vendor was not agreeing even to that! What could he do? He had made such an effort this morning and had ventured out to buy fish. He had rushed to the market even before completing his ablutions. He had not brushed his teeth or bathed. He had said at home that he would come home for lunch today and would eat

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fish curry. The fish looked mouth-watering. It must be tasty too. How could he let it go? How much can he haggle for only a few rupees?

He resigned to himself and said, "Okay, it is your time, these days. Weigh the fish now. But cut it into small pieces but take care to remove the bile or else it will make the fish bitter. Don't cut it into too small pieces, however."

"What are you talking, sir? Does hilsa have a bitter bile? You will realize it only when you will eat the curry."

"But what if it does not taste good?"

"You can return it then—even if it is cooked. I am doing regular business, sir. I don't cheat my customers. Won't my business suffer?" the fish vendor sounded confident.

By the time he reached home, Sanjay was sweating heavily. Normally he was at home at this time going through the daily ritual of bathing, dressing and getting ready for office. Today he is late. Some people were waiting at the verandah. They must have come for some favours. They looked shabby. Nothing can ever be achieved with such people he thought and avoided the main entrance and entered the house from the rear.

"Meera!" he called out, "Look what a good fish I have bought today!'

"0, you sound as if you have conquered a fort!" said Meera in jest and peered at the fish. "Why, it does not look fresh at all!"

"This is not fresh? What are you saying? This fish is very fresh. The fish vendor has told me he would return the money if it is found to be otherwise," Sanjay shouted at Nidhi who was at the tap washing the fish.

"Look, who are those people in the verandah?"

"Sir, they are waiting for you since two days. They do not get to meet you in the office. That is why they have come to the residence."

"What can I do if they don't find me at the office? Tell them to meet me there. I have no time now."

"Sir, they are waiting for over an hour..." Nidhi said.

"Okay, but I don't have any time now. Go and tell them to come to the office."

"Sir, at what time should they come?"

"How can I tell from now? There are so many meetings today. The Managing Director has asked me to meet him. Tell them to come later."

"Sir, they are from my village..." Nidhi said. While applying paste on his toothbrush, Sanjay stared at him and said, "Why didn't you tell me earlier? Okay, tell them to meet me at 12 noon and tell them to mention your name in the visiting slip." He continued to brush his teeth.

"The breakfast tastes very good today," Sanjay said.

"You are fond of idlis, that is why I have made them today," Meera purred.

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Sanjay was concentrating on eating.

"I want to tell you something," Meera continued.

"What is it?" Sanjay asked absent-mindedly and the very next moment he realised that Meera was about to ask for more money.

"Leave it for now. After you come back from the office, I will tell you about it," she said.

"All right", Sanjay said and washed his hands and was getting ready for the office.

When he reached there he was told that the MD was asking for him and had left for the Secretariat. 'Right, let the old man ask for me again, I will go and meet him then' he thought. He instantly put his thoughts aside and concentrated on the files piled on his table.

"Sir, some Nabaghana Babu is waiting for you. He says he has some urgent work with you. He says he is your childhood friend." Sanjay was slightly annoyed at the interruption. He was going through an important file. Nabaghana was a tout, but a clever man. Let us see what he wants now, he asked himself and told the peon to send him in.

"Why! Have you forgotten your poor friends? This is what happens when people occupy high posts." Nabaghana entered the room complaining. He was about to come around the large table and embrace him but Sanjay stopped him mid way. "Sit here," he said and motioned to a chair.

What madness! They had not met for years and now he was rushing to embrace him? Who knows why he has come. Sanjay was getting slightly irritated.

"Radhu Mishra's son, Navin's file is lying with you now. He has not received a single pie so far," said Nabaghana.

Sanjay never anticipated that Nabaghana would be so straight about his purpose. He was relieved.

"What happened to his file?" he asked. "There must be some discrepancies in it. Why else will it be pending for so long?"

"No, it is nothing like that. I have reminded him many times that he should come and meet you himself. Since you are from the same village, you will take personal interest and help him. But he is scared to meet you and told me, 'uncle, you go and meet him.' He was at my door since early morning today and was pestering me to come and meet you. Please look into his file. The poor boy has no money. He will do well in two to three years' time. He is afraid of you. Your office assistant had called him; he told me, 'uncle I don't have any money, how can I simply go and show my face?'

Sanjay was even more piqued on hearing this. This rascal had come to get his work done without spending a single pie? He is a contractor and

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has no money to cough up! Nabaghana must have definitely taken some money from him already.

"Okay, leave the matter. After three months, Nabina will come himself. Let him manage his affairs," Nabaghana studied Sanjay's temper and said while getting up to leave.

Sanjay was so disgusted that he did not even offer him any refreshments. Before he left, the head clerk entered the room.

"Sir, that girl, who was to work as a data entry operator on a daily wage basis has come to pay you a visit. Her name is Sarita Mohanty," the clerk told him.

Sanjay frowned. "But I don't have any time now. All right, send her in. But only for five minutes." But deep within he was excited that the head clerk was referring to her in a familiar tone.

"Sir, my sister and brother suggested that if I could get some accommodation at the guest house, it will be a little convenient for me to work. I have to travel thirty kilometres daily and it is very tiring for me," said Sarita with a calm and innocent tone anticipating an affirmative nod from her boss.

"Let me see what can be done. The guest house is not always vacant. You are a young woman. How can you stay there all by yourself?" Sanjay studied her reaction while he said this.

She was not bad to look at. More than her beauty, it was her youth, which made her alluring. She was wearing a light pink coloured salwar suit. She was working in his office for the past five days. She had come to meet him personally when he was on tour to Dhenkanal. She was prepared to do everything. That is what she had told him. She had told him that she was a graduate and had done a computer data entry course. She had begged him to give her a job, even if it was on daily wage basis. Sanjay was at first taken aback that a petite young girl was approaching him directly for a job and was hinting that she could do anything in return! He was tempted and told her to meet him in the office. He was well aware that it was beyond his capacity to offer her a permanent job. But let her continue some time on daily wage basis, he thought.

"I can manage, sir, there is no problem," said Sarita with confidence. For the second time Sanjay was surprised at her bold attitude and was a little apprehensive. She seemed so confident, can she be... his thoughts ran wild.

"Thank you, sir, thank you very much," Sarita smiled at him and turned to leave.

She acts smart! Is she planning to get things done so naively! Sanjay was deliberating.

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"Listen Sarita, there is a tour programme day after tomorrow, near Chilika. You also come. The steno will be on leave for another one week."

"No problem, sir, if only I know about the timings," she replied.

"Day after tomorrow, at 9 o' clock in the morning. My driver will pick you up from the guest house. I will collect some files from the office," he said calmly.

"All right, sir," Sarita wished him again and went out of the room swaying like a dancer, closing the door behind her. Sanjay was exulted at the prospect and was getting ready for the event.

"I had to tell you something. Do you remember? You are not asking me about it?" Meera was cuddling against him.

"What is it?" asked Sanjay indifferently. By then, dinner of roti and sabzi had been laid on the dining table.

"I have received a letter from my mother," Meera said, fixing her gaze on Sanjay. "She is suffering from some pain in her lower abdomen. She cannot move around. She is taking medicines for the past two months, but they are of no help. Who knows she may be having a tumour!" Meera poured this out in one breath.

Sanjay did not react.

"Can't we bring her here?" She was now pressing. "What can she do? There is no one else. We are the only support she has. If we can get some tests conducted here, she can rest here for a month at least."

"Why don't you inform your brothers? There are better doctors in Delhi. Tests can be done better there. The disease can also be diagnosed correctly," Sanjay replied calmly.

"Mother has written about this too. She has written two letters to my brother, but there has been no response. But we can get the tests done free, can't we? It won't be too much of a problem—it is a matter of a few months only," Meera said.

"I am not talking about whether it is a month or six month affair. The fact is that these days it costs a fortune even if the doctor simply sees a patient. Forget about that, the tests and treatment expenses will be high. Do you understand? A minimum of rupees ten to twelve thousand," Sanjay told her.

"Don't I understand? But what can we do? She is my mother, after all. We should do at least this much for her! I have a little savings of my own." Meera was on the verge of tears.

"Arrey, don't get so upset. Am I bothered about the expense? You write to your brother. Things are serious. Even if he cannot take her in and look after her, he should share the expenses." Sanjay advised her. He continued, "He does not have any financial liabilities. If we shoulder all the

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responsibility, he should at least contribute some monetary help. It is decided then. We will go and bring your mother here the coming Sunday."

"You are right. I will ring up my brother tomorrow. He thinks he can shirk away from his responsibilities so easily!" Meera concluded.

Sanjay went off to sleep peacefully after the dialogue was over.

"Hey, it is so late, are you not getting up today? Why are you sleeping like a rock?" Meera shook him.

"What is the time now?" Sanjay got up startled.

"It is already eight. The phone is ringing since morning. But you are sleeping like a log, won't wake up even with that sound," Meera was quite irritated.

Sanjay could not understand why Meera was so upset. He replied: "Why didn't you wake me up, then?" That very moment he realised that Meera had reason to be annoyed.

"If I did not pick up the phone, who else did?" she was obviously irked by then.

"What happened? Who called?" Sanjay softened his voice.

"What will happen? Your father had called. He asked me what are we doing about the matter..." Meera's tone remained resentful.

"About what matter?" Sanjay really could not follow her.

"What else?" she lost her cool and retorted. "About Anita's marriage. Did he not write to you to arrange one lakh rupees for it? What have you done about it? He was enquiring. In fact, he wanted to speak to you directly. I told him that you were sleeping and asked whether I should wake you up. But he told me to convey the message and to tell you to ring him up later."

"Okay," Sanjay replied in a monosyllable. And then pushed away the quilt and headed for the bathroom.

"Why are you not saying anything?" Meera confronted him.

"Let me come back from the office. Now it is getting late," Sanjay responded curtly. Meera went out of the room in a huff.

"Do you like your dinner tonight?" Meera was purring against him after she had served him. There was not a trace of the morning's bad temper. Perhaps she had realised that her gain lay in a truce.

"Yes, it is tasty. You eat some more," Sanjay told her.

"No, first you finish eating," she put some more of the prawn curry on his plate. She asked softly, "From where will we get one lakh rupees?"

"Really, we have to think about it." Sanjay concentrated on his food.

"If we can keep only the homestead and sell off the land near the mango orchard—. As such, that land is not fertile. It does not yield anything. Let your father sell it. He will get at least Rs 50,000 from it and it will be

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divided between you two brothers. You will get at least half of the amount." Meera paused to gather her breath after uttering all these words in one go.

"The remaining Rs 50,000?" Sanjay asked her, after he heard her suggestion that seemed appealing to him. He was also quite impressed by her wisdom.

"For the balance, tell your father to send us a list of things to be bought for the wedding. We can buy here at a bargain of Rs. 30,000," Meera was negotiating now.

"Okay, let me discuss the matter with father," Sanjay told her and was surprised at her calculating mind. He was nevertheless pleased with her practical thinking.

"What will you discuss with him? You have to press the matter. He will produce daughters and we have to get them married. What a beggar family I have, married into...!" Meera's voice was filled with resentment.

* * *

The job at Chilika was over quite soon. It was a matter of only half an hour any way. What was there to be done! Does it matter whether there was any important job to be done or not? He had to come here—Sanjay was musing. He would have lunch at Barkul Rest House. He had already asked for room service and had ordered lunch for both of them.

"Sit here, Sarita. We have to stay here for a few hours. That is why I did not book two rooms for us unnecessarily. One room is enough to get refreshed." By the time Sanjay uttered these words, lunch was served. Sarita was eating quietly. Sanjay could not eat much. He got up first and washed.

"You look a little disturbed, what is the matter? Are you okay?" Sanjay asked her. Sarita too did not eat much and washed in the meantime.

"Sir, it is nothing, I am perfectly okay," she replied.

Despite the reply, Sanjay noticed she was a little nervous. And he felt tickled about it.

"Come and sit here. I am really impressed by your courage," he motioned her to come closer.

"Sir, I am very scared," she made a lame protest.

"You are afraid of whom? Me? Don't you have faith in me? There is nothing to fear" he assured her.

"Still, sir..." she sounded a little reluctant although she had already made herself comfortable where Sanjay had asked her to sit.

"I love you, Sarita. I like you very much. Believe me..." Sanjay uttered those words passionately while gently drawing her dupatta away from her breasts.

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"Sir, what about my job? Please do something for me, sir. I am in great difficulty." Sarita raised the topic when they were ready to leave Barkul. She sounded a little authoritative by then.

"Listen, keep this. Don't refuse now." Sanjay fished out a bundle of hundred rupee notes and handed it to her almost forcibly.

"No Sir, what is all this?" Sarita fligned her resistance.

"Look Sarita, this is not much. It is for your immediate requirements. Have faith in me. I will definitely do whatever is possible on my part. Please accept this and don't hurt me by refusing." Sanjay was pleading with her.

"Why are you so late today?" Meera interrogated when he reached home.

"Arrey, what shall I tell you? There was an inspection today," Sanjay lied. He was taking off his shoes and could not face his wife directly.

"Why did you not mention to me about your tour programme? Where had you been? You could have taken me along!" Meera was accusing him.

"I had to rush to the office near Chilika area and come back. It was such a hectic trip that I could not even think of taking you with me. What is the point travelling so far and yet not being able to go boating either to Kalijai or Nalabana islands? I have better plans. We will go there during the Christmas vacations and spend two/three days with our children. I will do the bookings in advance," Sanjay blurted out these words very conveniently.

"Do you know, I had phoned your father?" She sounded very calm.

Sanjay was yawning by then and was in no position to pay attention to whatever she said. He was itching for a good sleep.

"Initially he was grumbling a little. Then I explained the matter to him so calmly that he ultimately gave in to my proposals," Meera said.

"Accha! What did he say?" Sanjay asked.

"He said, whatever you feel is good, go ahead and do it. After all it belongs to you people only."

Sanjay was glad at the fact that Meera was trying hard to save his property. He too was filled with sympathy for her.

"Manjit Desai had not given only twenty thousand rupees that day....", said Sanjay looking at Meera.

"Then?" Meera was crestfallen.

"There were in fact two bundles of five hundred-rupee denominations amounting to one lakh rupees."

"0, my God! Why didn't you tell me before! You liar..." Meera was overcome with joy. Even if he revealed it so late, she liked the fact that her husband had ultimately confided in her nevertheless.

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"It is not that, Meera. I never got any opportunity to tell you before," said Sanjay. "For my loving lovely wife there will be fifty thousand rupees from the amount. You can buy anything you like. Even jewellery from the designer shops," he pampered her with pride.

Meera's eyes were suffused with tears of gratitude. She was choked with happiness and unable to utter anything. She could only smother her husband's body like a kitten.

Gratification, bliss and happiness filled Sanjay's sleepy eyes too.

Translated from Oriya by Mona Lisa Jena

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The Wizard of Words*: Rajinder Singh Bedi

Padma Sachdev

> You are going towards the temple? Don't choose this path; it is a very plain and smooth path. Rather, tread that uneven and crooked path where there is filth, squalor and blood.
>
> Your feet will be mired in filth, your clothes will be stained with grime, your body will be smeared with blood, but you shall reach the temple because your stature is high and you can see the domes of the temple.
>
> Don't care for yourself and go on leaving your footprints. Following them, lakhs of people gone astray will reach the temple, and then you shall also find the temple a clean place.
>
> Don't compromise the sanctity and greatness of the temple by choosing this plain and clear path.

This is a short composition of Bedi Saheb. The life of Rajinder Singh Bedi, the acclaimed Urdu story-teller, the wizard of words, the trader of tales, is a complete story in itself; take it up at any point, and the whole story unfolds itself layer by layer. He used to experience a pleasant smell from books from his very childhood. His journey from words to filmdom is also a story in itself. That was the hey-day of his film *Dastak*. After taking India by storm, Bedi Saheb had gone to London with this film. Sehab Kazalbash was a strong bridge between the litterateurs of India and Pakistan. This lady is highly sensitive, amiable and has a mellifluous voice. Hailing from Delhi, she loves Mushairas very much. Once when she had come here to

* Talk delivered at the "Through my Window" programme of Sahitya Akademi.

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participate in one such Mushai'ra, the hemistich of her Ghazal made everyone cry.

Cherishing the tales of memories in their hearts
come your lovers, O country, hark!

Being associated with the BBC, she used to have information on every visiting litterateur from India. Somehow, she had found out about me also. I had gone to my brother-in-law in London.

Bedi Saheb was in London and Sehab had thrown a party in his honour. I was also invited. As I was entering the house, I could hear the guffaws of Bedi Saheb even from outside. Bedi Saheb was happy to see me. Mr. Faraz was also there. Along with the writers of woeful tales and verses, there were other writers also. The atmosphere was vibrant.

The Mushai'ra started and everyone was expressing the sadness of Partition in his/her verses. Most of the verses were reminiscent of the native land. The country had been partitioned but no one could partition the estate of literature. All had poured out their hearts in the verses. Bedi Saheb was in tears. He asked me to recite my poem "Desh."

All the verses were like the women-folks of one single house.

After the Mushai'ra, anecdotes, mirth, jokes, etc. also started to pour forth in the dinner. Munching a mutton piece from his filled plate, Bedi Saheb said to Sehab, "The mutton of Muslims is really delicious."

With tearful eyes, Sehab replied, "Who knows it better than Sardarjis."

The atmosphere changed altogether and became heavy. To make it heavier, one maverick asked, "Bedi Saheb, why don't you shave off your beard?"

Everyone was taken aback. As if the threats of Indo-Pak war had suddenly heightened. Danger was looming large in the entire room. Nobody was looking at each other. The spoon in one's hand stayed unmoving. Plates were staring at their own emptiness. Ladies forgot to set right their flying *dupattas*. Sadness settled in the eyes of the people. Terror started raising its head.

Bedi Saheb helped himself with some more mutton and caressing his beard came out with a reply. His voice was like the light at the end of a tunnel after the train had passed through. Bedi Saheb was saying, "Yaar, I am also thinking of shaving this beard, but then I am afraid as to what may come out from behind it."

With this, the beautiful evening which was lit up by the lamps of peals of laughter got even more beautiful.

Bedi Saheb's film *Dastak* was about to be released. He asked me to

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distribute pamphlets outside the cinema hall. At that time I was only that much. Bedi Saheb's son Narendra was the friend and class-fellow of my husband. Even otherwise too, carrying out the orders of a writer of the stature of Bedi Saheb was a pleasure. So, here I was, distributing the pamphlets the day the film was released. The show was yet to start. Bedi Saheb was busy welcoming everyone. Meanwhile, a person came over and began saying, "Bedi Saheb, do you not know how to count above ten (*Das*)? What is this *Das-tak*?" Bedi Saheb laughed. The show went on.

Smt. Bedi comes to memory—a tall, beautiful Sardarni. It was the occasion of the marriage of Majrooh Sultanpuri's son. I had gone with my elder sister to attend it. Didi asked me to sing a song. Majrooh Saheb's wife also insisted. I was singing *Banne* (song for the bridegroom) to the accompaniamennt of dholak. Suddenly, I saw Smt. Bedi scolding a foreign lady in Punjabi, "You are shadowing my son so much as if you are scheming to marry him. Had you got married him with one of your own daughters, then I would have roped in Padma. *Phite Munh* (Shame on you)." The atmosphere became so colourful that everyone started laughing. Didi also understands the meaning of *phite munh* (Shame on you) very well and she was also happy. This was my first encounter with Bhabhiji. She was a very free-wheeling, bold, assiduous and domineering lady. Bedi Saheb often used to say, "The credit for our survival during Partition goes to my wife. She is like a Police Inspector."

Now and then Bedi Saheb was seen in Bombay. During those days, the Dogri story writer Ved Rahi began making the film *Prem Parvot* and asked me to write the lyrics. The music was being composed by Jaidevji. The songs were a hit. My husband was then in the Income Tax and many producers approached him to persuade me to write lyrics for them. They were sure about getting the dates from Lataji. When I consulted Didi she said, "Why do you worry? Dates will not at all be a problem for you." However, I was not satisfied. Dinkarji also said, "You are a classy poetess, why are you doing this job of shoe-mending?" I felt sour. When real poetry started eluding me while I hunted for *Mukhrra* (rhyming), I decided not to write songs for films any more.

During those days, Bedi Saheb had decided to make the film *Aankhil Dekhi*. He came to our house and asked me to write the songs. I agreed, upon the condition that he would have to come to my house for this. At that time, the one-year-old daughter of my husband's elder brother was with us. I didn't move out much. Bedi Saheb, his film director, music director, tabla player, other instrumentalists and heroine Suman used to come to our house. With their coming, Smt. Bedi also started calling me on phone. She

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used to say, "Padma, Bedi Saheb must have come over there. Who else are with him?"

I asked, 'Would you like to talk to him? He is sitting out on the terrace." She said, "No, I don't have to talk to him, but please inform me if a tall girl with a poverty-stricken face comes there. She is the heroine of the film." I said, "Sure thing Bhabhiji, I will." Bhabhiji said, "She may not come now if she has not come already. She has spoilt the mind of Bedi Saheb at such an advanced age."

Immediately upon arrival, Suman asked if she could help me in any manner. I asked her to peel the peas. After receiving Bhabhiji's phone, I gave her one kilo of onions to skin. She was skinning and cutting the onions and also shedding tears. People were singing on the terrace. Bedi Saheb came to know that Bhabhiji had rung me up. He told my husband, "Yaar Surinder, what should I do? My own brothers are my wife's spies. They tell her all about my adventures. Once, I had rented a room. I used to do some reading-writing there. Sometimes, women also came to meet me. Now, her spies must have told this to my wife. One day, I was writing film dialogues. The sound of high heels was coming towards my room. I was surprised as nobody was expected to come that day. In a while, I saw my wife standing at the door clad in sari, wearing lipsticks, and with ill-kempt, coiled up hairs. I was wondering whether this woman was really my wife. Noticing my surprise, she said, 'I was going to the market; passing this way, I thought I might as well see you.' My wife and shopping!"

Bedi Saheb resumed, "I gave up in frustration, but could not say anything to my brothers. After all, they did not tell her so many other things about me."

Radio broadcast started in Jammu & Kashmir in 1948. Sheikh Saheb had been holding the Information & Broadcasting portfolio. He respected educated and literary persons very much. It was Sheikh Saheb who brought Bedi Saheb to the State. Bedi Saheb was the first Director of the State Radio. He visited schools and colleges and enquired among the students about their interest in radio. Some students blushed, some shied away and some skirted his questions. But the Dogri poet Yash Sharma and Jitendra Sharma, who was interested in drama, switched over to the radio and earned good name. Those days, anti-India propaganda was rife in Pakistan. Bedi Saheb started a programme entitled 'Just Five Minutes'. In these five minutes, all the Pakistani propaganda used to be effectively rebutted. Bedi Saheb himself used to write the programme in his crisp and pointed style. This programme was heard both in India and Pakistan.

Jitendra Sharma told me these things. He said, "Once I had gone to his house with some important files. Outside, a Sardarji was sitting in the

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lawn in underwear with loosened beard. I asked him whether Bedi Saheb was in. He said yes and asked me to go inside. When I went inside, his wife affectionately offered me a chair and tea and snacks. Then Bedi Saheb entered the drawing room in Kurta Paijama and said, 'I had been told that Dogras are very good aides. But you are wonderful; you did not recognize your own officer.' Then he burst into a guffaw." Jitendraji also said that when Bedi Saheb left, the people had wept their hearts out. He was their mentor.

In London, Aale Hasan Saheb, the famous BBC artiste, had invited us to his house. Spending the whole day, he had prepared many varieties of mutton in honour of Bedi Saheb. There were ladysfingers, black pulse and some variety of *Koftas*. After boozing, it was the turn of baking chapattis. Bedi Saheb did not like any kind of bread. Aale Bhai immediately rushed to his sister's house and turned up with a plate for rolling the dough, rolling pin and griddle. By that time, I had kneaded the flour. Now had come the time to bake the best chapatti of the world. Since I was also recently married, I was taking lessons from my mother-in-law in making chapattis. Without much effort, the chapatti could be rolled full round and upon keeping it on the grill after baking, it got fully swelled. Everyone started shouting — 'It has swelled, it has swelled.'

When Bedi Saheb offered that chapatti in honour of Begam Aale Hasan on that pleasant evening, she declined to accept it. Feeling abashed, Bedi Saheb himself ate that chapatti.

It was only natural to felicitate Bedi Saheb in Southhall in London since it was London's Ludhiana. I was also invited. Now, if Bedi Saheb was there, jokes came their natural way. He said, "Padma, get yourself photographed with me. We will get it printed once we go to Bombay." And he laughed heartily. I said, "Sure, Bedi Saheb. Your sins will also be cleansed. Narendra Bedi is right when he says 'normally sons get spoilt, but it is my father who is spoilt.'"

After many years we heard while in Bombay about the serious condition of Bedi Saheb due to stroke. He was admitted in the Nanavati Hospital. After a few months came the tragic news of the death of his son, Narendra. Both my husband and I had gone to console him. Bedi Saheb said, "Yaar Surinder, now I want to get well. Who will look after my daughter-in-law?" Beena, Narendra's wife, used to take good care of him. He used to say, 'Padma, she was my mother in my previous birth. My daughters, my sisters — all of them — how much they care for me. I tell you, they have forgotten all my past misdeeds. If I survive, I can write so much on women. A woman makes all the sacrifices." Then his eyes had welled up with tears. And I recalled Bhabhiji saying, 'Do you think he is a writer? In fact, whatever talking I do through the day, he reduces them to

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writing in the night. And he claims himself to be a writer!"

I used to go to see him sometimes. I never saw anybody else coming to enquire about his health. His daughter-in-law often said, "About the time I came here after marriage, so many people used to call on him that he did not have time to even tie his turban."

After this conversation, we used to avoid each other. But I had made it a point to visit him at least once a fortnight. Often, I used to take with me one of his contemporaries. Mostly, Ismat Aapa used to come with me. They both used to talk about those days of which I was totally ignorant. However, I used to enjoy it as if I were following them in the lanes of the bygone days. Once I had taken Amrit Lal Naagar also there. Naagar Saheb told Ismat Aapa, 'Ismat, you remember when you had gone to Lucknow for the shooting of *Junoon*? I had given you bhang. After four glasses, you were intoxicated.' Aapa fought back, 'Come on, nothing can intoxicate me, be it beer or bhang.' Then addressing Bedi Saheb, she said, 'See, how he has said a white lie.' We rolled over with laughter.

Once when Aapa and I went there, Bedi Saheb was listless. He said weeping, "Ismat, I fell from the bed in the night writhing with pain. I want to die now." Aapa was dumb-founded with sadness. But hearing this, she retorted, "Just sit silent and don't mention the word death. What have you achieved while living that you now want to achieve by dying? You want to die!" Bedi Saheb started laughing amidst tears. Then they resumed talking.

I remember there were some books and photos on the wall in his room. Bedi Saheb used to talk to me while sitting on the bed. From his talks, another facet of his personality came out. Bedi Saheb said, "Those were the days of Partition. People were scurrying for shelter. Crowded trains were running here and there in which people were stuffed like chattel.

"A train from Lahore had been stranded at Ambala for three days. Local people had extended a helping hand and were distributing boiled grams, water, chapattis, pickles, etc. Countless people were in dire want of things. Chapattis were hurling here and there. Kheer thrown from a distance fell on the face of someone, someone else scraped it up and ate it. There was no feeling left. Hundreds of people were sitting on the roof of this train; they were not ready either to leave their land or the train. Voices had melted into one as if the sounds of innumerable rivers merge into one single sound of the ocean. A Sikh youth was sitting on the roof of that train with his belongings. His wife and children were also there somewhere in that train. He had to travel over a sea of the heads of people to arrange for something to eat. Before this, when the train had crossed a bridge, many a careless head had been severed from the body. The young Sardar had clung to the roof of the train. He had only received some scratches on his back, but had

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survived". A weeping Bedi Saheb said that he was that young, unfortunate Sardar.

From his childhood, this young Sardar used to get the fragrance of books. He used to feel happy by keeping books scattered around him and read them sticking on to them. But he could not afford to remember these things at that time. Nothing else came to his mind in the frantic efforts to survive and the worry over obtainging provisions. There was no money left. Somehow, he reached Shimla. He had some books with him ready for publication. For him books still emitted fragrance which had ramained even after passing through such an obnoxious, fearsome and terrifying atmosphere.

Saying this, Rajinder Singh Bedi started caressing the books stacked in the cupboard on the wall. His lean and thin hands looked like a part of the wall itself. Then, taking a book in his hand, he began to say — "This book saved us at that time. After a lot of persuation, one publisher agreed to publish the book. He gave me an advance of two thousand rupees. When I handed it over to my wife, she was surprised. She used to think of me as being reckless, but two thousand rupees was a big amount in those days and our family was on track then onwards. She had managed the family at Lahore so excellently.

I once asked Bedi Saheb what his earliest memory was. He replied that after coming into this world and getting his senses, he had the feeling of falling, like falling on to the ground from Mother's lap, feeling of some fear. This seems to be the first ever feeling he could recall.

"I was born in Lahore. My father was a postmaster. Our house was attached to the office. I frequently fell sick in my childhood. My mother had taken me to the shrine of Vaishno Mata in Jammu. I remember riding on a backer. Earlier, there used to be tortoises in the water flowing in the cave inside the Vaishno Mata shrine. We used to get frightened of them. After coming out of the shrine, I had eaten gram and roasted rice for the first time. I had recuperated."

At that time, I was in Class Two. One day, the Maulana (Urdu teacher) came to our house. He asked me to read out anything of my choice. When I read something, the Maulana was very happy. 'You are only in Class Two, still you read so well. You will definitely achieve something in life.' I told the Maulana that I did not understand Mathematics. The Maulana said, 'To hell with Mathematics' and I followed his advice. Bedi Saheb started laughing.

'Well, Padma, my father used to bring books daily from the library. He was very fond of reading. My mother was a TB patient and she was always sick. Father used to read for her in the light of the lamp and we sat down around him. Perhaps, I fell in love with books this way. Mother

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used to recite the *Ramayana*. The magic of the quatrains of the *Ramayana* used to fill the room."

Bedi Saheb was looking at his frail hands. He started speaking slowly, "My mother was a Khatri (a caste of Punjab). I understand that she was a widow. Father had brought her to Lahore from Majitha village. They had married there in an Arya Samaj temple. Father had given liberty to Mother to continue to follow her religion while he would follow his own. We listened from Mother the tales of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the Saakhiyan (couplets) of *Guru Granth Sahib*. Both the religions merged in our hearts.

"Those days when I had got addicted to reading, I read a story "Sukh Dhabba". I still remember that in those days even thinking about the relation between man and woman was like a sin. But I could also not help thinking about this relationship. I used to read books sitting on the *mounti* of the terrace. There was a *Gondani* tree in the front. Girls used to chew its red fruit, spit out and then show their reddened tongues and lips to each other. I used to wonder whether anything else could be more beautiful in this world. Lahore used to be a sprawling city those days. There was a huge, open courtyard at the back of our house. I used to take furtive glances at girls as I was growing up. I was in Class Ten when my mother died. I remember that when we came back after immersing Mother's ashes in the Ganga, Father and I went to see the film *Sohni Mahiwal*. Father kept weeping throughout the film. The sorrow of Mother's death haunted him."

Bedi Saheb's daughter-in-law Beena served tea. When we had finished tea, Bedi Saheb resumed, "Padma, the creature called woman is a strange thing. Any home cannot be complete without her. After my mother's death, one day my father told me about a beautiful girl from a certain village with whom he fixed my marriage. I was so sad that I jumped into the well. People rescued me. All the arrangements for the marriage had been made. I was insisting on not marrying. At the time of Phera (going round the holy fire with the bride), I picked up a stone and hit my father-in-law with it. Still, there was no disruption in the marriage and it got duly solemnized.

Those days, the journal *Vande Mataram* was in circulation. I contributed a story to it. It was mailed from my father's post office and he came to know about it. The story was about the struggle for Independence. My father requested the editor not to publish the story; otherwise his job would be in jeopardy. It was my first story, but I could not pursue the matter."

My wife was not only beautiful but very accomplished as well. With her, our home was the very heaven. Narendra had been born. Peace reigned in the house. I was well-established in writing. During those days, I wrote a story "The Life of Zebunnisa". The story had taken a lot of my labour.

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The editor was very pleased and he sent for me. However, on seeing me, his enthusiasm sapped. When he was convinced that I was Rajinder Singh Bedi, he engaged me for editing *Sarang* magazine. I ran it for two-three years. My first literary story was "Maula". It was followed by "Garam Coat". I used to write about the common man. I was well-settled in the literary world."

I asked Bedi Saheb about the passion which made him write stories. He replied, "I myself don't know. Perhaps the basic idea of the story affects me. Take my story "Babbal". I have seen that Babbal. That rotund child inspired me to write this story. For a story to come about, some influence is necessary. A darkish woman used to roam about with that fair-complexioned child. However, out of the two, only that child attracted me. I think it is better if the story was in one single focus. The end of any story occur to me first. Then I drag the story to its end. The end of a story is very important. Then it is also required to read many books to write one story. A lot of reading is required to write even a little.

"I was a script writer in Lahore Radio. I wrote some plays also during those days. One drama *Haq-e-Mehar* was acclaimed by the people. In those days, my salary was one hundred and fifty rupees. I had two children. I have never again felt as happy as I used to be then. I had rented a bungalow in Model Town on a rent of thirty-three rupees per month. My officers had given me total freedom to come and leave the office whenever I liked. Then I also felt like working hard. I started a programme *Replies to Letters*. We used to receive lots of letters. It was a pleasure replying to them. Whenever the number of letters fell, I used to draft both the letters and their replies. I had become the member of a club also. Those days saw the heights of luxury I ever enjoyed.

"Both of my brothers had also settled down. The younger one had become a clerk after Matriculation, and the youngest one a lecturer on completing his MA. I always regretted my lack of proper education.

"My wife treated them like her own children. Which was why they were more loyal to her than to me. My wife never gave me any kind of trouble. Then came Partition and everything got divided.

"I met Rafi Ahmed Kidwai at Delhi. He had read my stories. When Sheikh Abdullah consulted him regarding a suitable person for Jammu & Kashmir Radio, he recommended my name. I landed in Jammu as Director of the State Radio of Jammu & Kashmir. Those were the days of war. A plane was leaving for Jammu carrying provisions for the soldiers. Myself, my wife and children were also loaded on to the gunny bags in that plane and thus we reached Jammu.

"Sheikh Saheb accorded me the honour due to a special guest. He

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received me with great affection. He told me that I had enhanced his prestige by accepting his offer. Thus, I was appointed as the first Director of the Radio of Jammu & Kashmir. In the building that went by the name of the radio station, there were just one or two rooms. For residence, I got the Shahmiri bungalow right in front of Sheikh Saheb's Kothi. Sheikh Saheb had tremendous respect for litterateurs. I enjoyed many privileges he offered. Bakshi Saheb was very jealous of this all. I was in two minds as to whether to continue there or not. Then, scheming started against me. Bakshi Saheb was the Home Minister of the State at that time. Nobody could afford to displease him. I resigned and came to Bombay before the arrest of Sheikh Saheb. We came to the verge of starvation. My family was still in Jammu. We were yet to get stabilised after leaving Pakistan and this shock befell us.

"My brother-in-law was staying in Bombay at that time. He put me up in his house on the first day. Amar Kumar was also with me. I had with me the manuscript of *Kokhjali*. I searched out a publisher and gave him this book for printing. He agreed to give me an advance of twelve hundred rupees of which six hundred he gave me immediately. We managed to get a place to lay two bedsteads. We were without any work throughout the day. A cobbler sat in front of our room. I used to observe him the whole day, how he was treating the leather, how he was sewing, how he used to beat the leather soft after dipping it in water, how he was fixing the nails and so on. Days were passing in such inactivity when someone introduced me to Dr Kashyap. We went to meet him in his office at Parel. He looked at me with surprise and asked me whether I was the same Bedi who wrote stories. Looking at my face those days, it was difficult to imagine whether such a person was capable of doing anything at all." Telling this, Bedi Saheb smiled. There was in his smile only the shadow of his bursts of laughter of the bygone days.

Regaining his composure, he spoke again, "Kashyap wanted to engage me for story and dialogue writing. He offered me six hundred rupees per month. I asked for one thousand. Amar Kumar who was well-aware of our pitiable condition, said angrily, 'What is this regal pose? You are rejecting six hundred rupees! You don't have even a roof, still you are so stubborn.' Next day, Kashyap again called and offered six hundred. I persisted with one thousand. Ultimately, he agreed for one thousand rupees. Those days, one thousand rupees amounted to a fortune. The Sardar who had taken me to Kashyap could not comprehead why I was being paid one thousand rupees.

"My wife was still in Jammu. I had not written any letter to her. I was struggling in Bombay. One day, I was drinking tea in the restaurant.

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I was lost in myself and the door banged open. Surprised, I saw my wife standing in front of me. She saw me and burst into crying. The luggage and the children were outside. She had earlier gone to her brothers' since she did not know anybody else. Her brother had nor let her in. It was the same brother who had stayed with us for long in our Model Town bungalow in Lahore. However, these things were irrelevant to be mentioned then. My wife and children were on the road at that moment and she was crying. I was nonplussed. Ultimately, I brought a seven-seater, dumped my wife and children in it and went to my brother-in-law. I took him in the bus and set out to look for a house. There was a Sardar's house near the Seven Bungalow. I was very angry; my brother-in-law had not cared to offer even water to my children. I hastily settled for the house for a monthly rent of three hundred rupees in a huff. One often does such hasty things in a fit of anger.

"The money that I had earned from the book stood in good stead at this juncture. On the one hand, my wife was most impressed and, on the other, my brother-in-law also was stupefied. He was dying of jealousy as to how I could manage a job which would bring me one thousand rupees as salary. My competent wife made the house heaven-like. We had not brought even a bed sheet from Pakistan. But my wife made a complete house. My first film *Barri Bahen* was a hit; *Daagh* also was a runaway success. I earned a lot of fame. After this, Sohrab Modi's film *Mirza Ghalib* also was a hit."

I felt it difficult to ask Bedi Saheb what I really wanted to. First, he was such a famous writer; second, his son was my husband's friend. One day, when he was in the proper frame of mind, I hesitatingly asked, "Bedi Saheb, people talk about you a lot in a flippant way. In this mere empty talk or is there some truth about it?"

Bedi Saheb touched his forehead and then laughed, "My wife used to suspect me a lot. From my part, I also gave her sufficient ground for it too.

"During those days, an English woman came into my life. This was about thirty years ago. She used to regularly visit our house. Somehow, my wife did not suspect her. Both of them used to chat and go shopping together. I took her many times to Matheran but my wife never suspected us. When somebody told her about this, she replied, 'Do you think I am mad? What will that lady find in this dark, boorish Sardar?' The matter ended there." With tearful eyes, Bedi Saheb exclaimed that his wife was a very simple lady.

Bedi Saheb spoke sadly and slowly "Padma, I want you to return filled with the memories of my life. But I am helpless; I am not able to recall

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much. I am again feeling emptiness in my mind. I feel tired as if somebody is running away with all my strength."

About a week or a half after this, I was going to Bedi Saheb's with Ismat Aapa and I requested her to give me a full description about his character.

With a lit up face, Ismat Aapa said, "He is a lovely person. Krishen (Chander), Manto, Bedi and myself were of the same age. We used to talk for hours together like true friends. Bedi used to be crazy about his wife. He was her true lover. After her death, he was never in the proper frame of mind. He is a simpleton.

"Bedi's parents used to love him very much. His growth has been built on love. He is highly emotional. His wife was also very lovely. When she met me for the first time, she told me with a frown that if I talked to her husband, she would gouge out my eyes. I also retorted by saying, 'Who cared about him? He was so short in stature and naive and also sported a beard, which reminded me of a Maulvi. This Sardar was of no use for me. After this, we became close friends. Then she said irritatingly, 'You are so shameless. You talk to men in such an overt manner.' I replied, 'Why shouldn't I? You are also free to do so. Why are you jealous?' She said, 'Go and see whether your husband is eating anything or not. You should care for him also.' I was eating my food. I replied, 'Why should I take care of him? You can also do it.' She came to the fighting mode and said, 'Why should I worry about your husband? I will take care of my husband; you worry for your own.' I made a rejoinder, 'I am not asking you to elope with Shahid. I have simply asked you to keep an eye over his plate.'

"She flew into a rage and said, 'You have become stark shameless. Who wants to talk to you? And you boast of being a great writer!'"

Telling me these things, Aapa laughed at me like people laugh at some stupid child. Then she said in a serious tone, "This Bedi was a simpleton. One filmy maiden ruined him. He did not care for his wife in those days and she died. See, if a man is a simpleton, then his wife always spoils him. Bedi's wife used to over-protect him.

"We have spent so many days together. Once, all of us had gone to the bungalow of Mulk Raj Anand at Khandala. We enjoyed our picnic for three days. Bedi's wife was also with him. Those were the days!"

We had reached Bedi Saheb's house. When we went inside, he said, "Ismat, I have to undergo the operation. I doubt whether I will survive. I am being summoned when I want to get cured. Who will look after my young daughter-in-law and my grandchildren? Even if the male member of the family is sick, at least his presence acts as a protection. I had been told that daughters-in-law are bad, but my daughter-in-law is better than

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my son. How will I repay her for all that she is doing for me? I am so much indebted to her. I have been sick for six years. I guess the treatment will start only now."

We all became sad. When Aapa started looking at his books, Bedi Saheb said, "Ismat, I have written all these books, with these hands. Now I cannot even lift the pen with these hands." Aapa replied, "Once you recover, you will start writing again."

"Ismat, now I fear that I will never get well. Had my wife been alive, I would not have worried about my daughter-in-law and my grand-children. She would have healed me had she been around."

Aapa asked him whether she was a doctor to heal him. He replied that she was like a doctor, too.

Remembering his wife, Bedi Saheb started weeping. We all were sad. Bedi Saheb wept that day as if he was mourning his own death. Aapa did not console him. Bedi Saheb started lamenting, describing how his wife had died.

I also glided into the past. I recalled that my husband and myself had gone to condole the death of Bhabhiji. Bedi Saheb told us about her last moments. Bhabhiji was bed-ridden in the hospital. Bedi Saheb was always by her bedside. In between, whenever he went to take paan, he rang up Suman.

Bedi Saheb continued, "Yaar, I asked her whether I could go out for paan. She said, 'Go, you will never refrain from your duplicity.' Yaar, when I went to have paan, I rang up Suman also. I might have taken long at the phone. When I entered the room chewing paan, my wife asked, 'You have rung up Suman!'

"I looked at her filled with shame. She turned her face to the other side. And then she died. Now I have no interest in life without her. Now, my pranks lack any thrill or charm. Now who cares where I go. Life has lost all its charm now."

That day also Bedi Saheb had wept. That was to atone for his sins. He had cried remembering the death of his wife. But today Bedi Saheb was weeping for his own death. Today, he wanted to live.

Coming back home, Aapa and I did not talk. We had felt as if we were returning from a family where a death had taken place.

Translated from Hindi by Shailendra Nath

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Dina Nath Nadim

Anecdotes

I

A flower spoke to the soil
but its pains remained untold;
the bushes were pruned
but
they were trapped in sorrow.

They say the garden is abloom,
the sunshine washes the flowerbeds
and the cool reigns.

II

The topmost branch of a tree
trembled in the early morning
and
saw its shadow on the ground.
It looked towards the sky
but
fell in love with the earth.
wind shook the tree;
it lapped the pain

III

Two eyes gazed out of a window

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and then
came the wind.
The willows clothed the bride,
the anklets were for the bridal dance,
the headgear looked a rainbow.
Revelry was afrenzy
where the spring happened.
The people closed their shops,
not a sound was heard.

IV

A path, running through a field,
ended near a stream.
Over the other bank
they shaped a road
that led to a village.
Someone sent a message
over the stream.
The stream howled
as
it heard the tales
of the village
and
the city

V

The crows shouted
for
they knew not how to spend the leisure;
the nightingales adorned their nests,
the hay became stacks.
The nightingales hatched,
their dreams were visible.
One flight—
and the world knew the newborn.
Suddenly all shouting stopped.

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VI

Springwind passed by our door
and
with restive fingers
beat its breast.
I asked a flower, "What happened?"
In a comer
it puckered its lips.
Soon a dry petal appeared
and
the springbushes
beat their breasts.

VII

Time rested on a picture,
trees grew like mad;
On the canvas
there was a forest.
He who took the road
reached home.
Breath came into being
Where is the forest?
Where is the mind?

VIII

His colour told me
it was he.
I tried to name him
but
my breath froze,
lips petrified
and mouth was still.
All was darkness
but
a lightning showed its teeth.

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IX

A shoe
with its mouth open
lay on the road
longing for a draught of water.
A dog came,
shattered the shoe
and
took it to a stream.
Is thirst quenched?
A brick said to a stone:
"Your are a part
I am the whole."

X

A vessel
washed by the raindrops
looked like a woman's liquid face.
The raindrops

washed off its sins.
Somebody came
and kicked the vessel.
Shards lay here and there.
Two days later
children played with the fragments.

From hell to heaven
there are two—and-a-half steps.

XI

A hut leaned against a house
counting its days
winter after winter.
One winter
snow shattered its roof;

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another winter
rain felled it.
Someone bought the house
and
raised a bungalow instead.

Once upon a time
a hut was there;
now
it is sod.

XII

A plant irritably said to the slope:
"You have held my feet.
I crave for
a jump
a play
and
a song."
One day rain cast aside the plant.
The slope lost its patience.
Who knows
the plant may have been wise
but I know that
I am a ninny.

XIII

The oil in the lamp dwindled;
the wick was a flicker
and
the light too dwindled.
A moth danced into the dying flame;
the half-burnt hope
fell into a niche.
When the flame died
darkness gave a hysterical laugh.
Why trust laughter!

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Weeping knows no end.
Who lost
and
who won?

XIV

A pebble in the street corner
lay washed by the sun. I
The builder
piled a stone upon stone.
The pebble was lost
in the gravel.

Long back
Fate had written on its face:
'For the road.'
The builder ground it.
The pebble was dust.

XV

A wind
carrying twigs
climbed down a hill
and
walked on the riverbank.
The twigs got stuck against a mound of sand
and
found their place.
Since then the people say:
'The twigs are always for the fire.'

XVI

The wind lost its way
but
a whirlwind caught it

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in the middle of the road.
The leaves swerved
and
screamed.
Satan had entered the fray.
It was daytime.

XVII

A broken mirror
shone on junk.
A cow came
and
looked at it;
a dog came
and
breathed at it;
a mad woman lifted it
and
wrapped it in her rags.
Nobody knows
what happened to the broken mirror
afterwards.

XVIII

A thin stream
flowed down the hill
regally
A twig was its crown.
The river will overflow its banks
and
shake the earth.
After a splash
the twig got stuck against a mound of sand.
Maturity no slave to hollowness.

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XIX

The chrysanthemum espied the marigold
and said:
"Why hurry!
Stay awhile.
The sunshine is still all colour."
He replied
"You are in the dawn of youth;
my childhood died... long ago.
Yours are the shavings of autumn;
mine is only the incense of spring."

XX

The silence of the night said
"The dew is born."
Each leaf perspired.
The morning ray was aghast
and
died near the frost.

XXI

A lone naked poplar stood aloof,
there was a crowd of cows.
The leaves of a Chinar shook
and
the children shouted: "Caw...caw."
The crows fled like the wind
and
the branches trembled.
The poplar looked all around
and
found itself alone.

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XXII

A breeze left for a walk
for it
wanted to attend a fair.
A wind engulfed it;
the breeze lost its soul.

XXIII

A cloud shinned up a mountain,
a lightning struck it;
it felt helpless
when
trapped in the lap of the mountain range;
flight was forbidden,
a rock gripped it
and
it fell
and
reached the bottom
with a bang
I thought it was a thunder
the unexpected happened in home.
A friend invited a friend to a feast.
Does anyone ask the first snowfall:
"Where were you born?"

XXIV

A leaf detached from a tree
and
fell dancing upon the earth
The turf said:
"This is a friend come
from the uneven
and
fallen upon the level"

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XXV

A road jumped into a lane;
darkness was rooted there.
Two doors closeby
whispered
and
laughed
when they saw the road.
If spoken.
the talk will lengthen.
The flowers shed tears below
and
the sky was starry above.

XXVI

A sculptor sculpted a relief,
painted it
and
rediscovered its each limb.
When he looked at its face
he found the lost
and
lost the find.

XXVII

Mynas espied a small blackbird
and
from afar said:
"Hey, where are you going so early?
Who do you call up this time?"
The blackbird replied:
"You have to hide the booty of autumn,
I have to collect the treasures of spring."

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XXVIII

Ink spilled on a white cloth,
night ran away
after a long sleep.
I recalled the day
when
a crowd stared at me
for
a patch hid a hole in my garment.
The white
and
the black
quarrelled.
All existence rests on this duel.

XXIX

By the foot of a hill
a butterfly winged back trembling
to its home.
On the way
flowers welcomed it and said:
"Come,
sit beside us
and
live your youth."
The butterfly replied:
"You tempt and unfold and madden;
I show my colours in vain."

XXX

In the mid summer
the leaves of young poplars
fell.
Only a few leaves
crowned them;
the rest were taken away

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by the rain.
Listen:
"Fellow travellers are strangers here."

Translated from Kashmiri by Arvind Gigoo

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Shabir Hussain Mirza in Conversation with Ruskin Bond

Mirza Mr. Bond where and when were you born?

Bond I was born in 1934 in Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh. My father was a teacher at that time. I went to school in Shimla.

Mirza How did you spend your early childhood?

Bond Well, lot of it was spent in Jamnagar (Gujarat). My father started a school where children of princes were being taught. I was there till the age of six but when World War II broke out my father joined the RAF and was posted at places like Delhi, Calcutta and Karachi and I was put in a boarding school and I would come in my holidays to Dehradun where my mother's parents were settled and their mention has always been in my short stories. So a lot of my childhood and boyhood was spent in Dehradun. In Delhi also a bit of my childhood was spent. But my father died when I was only nine. So, the rest of my boyhood was spent with my mother's parents.

Mirza When were you first published?

Bond My first novel was published in 1956, *The Room On The Roof* and it was written a couple of years before but it took me some time to get a publisher. I was only 17 or 18 when I wrote it and it had to go through a couple of drafts and revisions. I was published by Henry Doicher. I was awarded John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957, which is given to a creative writer under 30. A year after I got it, it was also given to V.S.Naipaul.

Mirza Did you ever feel alien to the environment you lived in?

Bond Not here in India but when I went outside India, especially to England, after leaving school in the early 1950. I felt a bit alien there, to that environment particularly when I went to Jersey to live with my relatives and felt out of touch with India. But I always wanted to come back to India because my roots were particularly in this area, Dehradun where I had grown-up.

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Mirza Can you tell us about your first short story?

Bond Well, one of the early short stories is "The Eyes Have It, Night Train at Deoli". I stayed at Dehradun and I was just 21 and I was freelancing from that place. My best stories were written in this period. Particularly "Time Stops At Shamli". It was written about 1955.

Mirza You have written many short stories, novels, articles, essays and children's stories. What do you like most?

Bond I like writing short stories because it catches the intensity of the moment and gets the essence of it and I am an impatient writer and a short story can be written in two or three days while a novel takes at least a couple of years to get completed. Children's stories I too enjoy writing because I was always good at writing about childhood and so as I grew older I found it more interesting to write for children and about childhood.

Mirza You know, Mr. Bond every writer is first of all a good reader. What did you read in your childhood? At the age of 25, what sort of change occured in your choice?

Bond My tastes did not vary; I still like to go back to old favourites. As a boy I was always a voracious reader because I had a very lonely boyhood and books became company for me and I read whatever came in my way because in those days especially in small towns there were not many bookshops and whatever I could get hold of I would read. It would range from classics to comics. Then in my school we had a good library. I read a good deal. I read Berrie, Shaw and the short stories of A.G. Bates. I liked reading biographies and autobiographies of writers. I am not very knowledgeable but I try to keep in touch with latest writings around me.

Mirza Can you name any writer who served as inspiration for your writings?

Bond I used to enjoy the short stories of A.G.Bates, the American short story writer William Saroyan and also Checkov. I always enjoyed reading short stories.

Mirza Would you tell us something about your short story, "The Man Who Was Kipling"?

Bond Yes, I have written this story in which there was an imaginary meeting with Kipling's ghost and in which I also gave a sympathetic view of his works.

Mirza What are the subjects you like to read and write about?

Bond Well, I write a lot since I have been living here in the hills for many

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years. I write a lot about nature. I am very close to nature so I write about mountains and people who live in the hills of Himalaya. Most of my books are set in a small town like Dheradun, Mussoorie or a small village.

Mirza Mr. Bond, life is full of incidents. Is there any incident of your life that you remember often?

Bond Well, that is true and I go back to the memories of the days which I spent with my father because he was a very good father. We spent a lot of time together. He always took me to many places and it was so great a loss when he died and at that time I was only nine. It took me time to adjust with my stepfather when I was in my mother's home which was in fact my stepfather's home.

Mirza Would you tell us about the awards you recieved and about how you felt in those moments?

Bond Well, it is always nice to get some recognition. Certainly my first prize at that young age helped me get going. It gave me impetus to keep writing because it was not easy then to make a living out of writing. Opportunities here were limited to a few magazines and newspapers. Even book publishing was limited to text books and educational books. It was only in the 1980's that book publishing took off. So, my first award was encouraging and helped me to keep going in spite of some disappointments. Sahitya Akademi Award came much later in my writing career. Padma Shri is a great honour that I recieved. Sahitya Akademi Award did carry some money with it which at that time was very useful. For a writer it is always useful.

Mirza Sir, mostly your short stories are in the first person narration mode. Why this obsession in your writing?

Bond It is just a type. I feel easier in writing in the first person even if I am not writing about myself. Also I am a very subjective writer and so if I am not writing about myself I will be writing about people I know or the life around me or the things that I see through my own eyes or in my own perspective. So it is just that I find it much natural to me.

Mirza People have dreams especially when they are young. Would you tell us about yours?

Bond When I was at school I think the idea of becoming a writer did form. I was good at writing even when I was at school. Books like *David Copperfield* I liked the most and the idea of becoming a writer was much influenced by the character of David by Dickens. I certainly wanted to be recognised. And I think it is a

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gift to be creative. I am lucky that to some extent I realised that dream. And perseverance also comes in because I have known promising writers who were discouraged and gave up writing. So, a lot of perseverance is needed for writing. You can call me a writer without regrets. I certainly wanted to be recognised. I never thought in terms of money or making a lot of money; that is why I didn't make it. But I always wanted to be recognized. I am not famous world-wide; my reading public is here in India basically.

Mirza What is your message to young, aspiring writers?

Bond Never get discouraged. There was a line which I always kept in mind—that "never despair but work on even in despair." Don't give up easily, work hard. I remember the quote of a famous journalist, Red Smith; who once said: "Writing is easy; all you have to do is to sit down at your typewriter until little drops of blood appear on your forehead."

Mirza What about your adopted family?

Bond Without getting married I have children and grandchildren Siddarth and Gautum. It was actually their grandfather, my friend, who started living with me in the 1970's and that is how I have gathered this small family around me. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life as a bachelor with nobody taking care of me. But I feel very lucky that they are very caring.

Mirza Where do you mostly spend your time?

Bond Mostly at my home, at my desk. I do take walks occasionally on the hills.

Mirza How do you feel when research scholars come to you and ask about your work?

Bond Well, it is nice to know that somebody is taking my work seriously because it doesn't happen often. This has happened in recent years. In fact, I don't think anybody paid much attention to my writing when I was actually producing most of my stories, novellas. Suddenly much attention is being paid now. I feel comfortable while writing rather than talking about my own work.

Mirza Is there any story of yours which you could never finish?

Bond There have been some ideas which I think I should have written about. Some people ask why don't you write a big novel but I think I am not really that kind of a writer. I am more at home with a shorter medium like the short story, essay or novel or even a children's poem. The important thing is that I do write for enjoyment and I don't think that I have written anything unless

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I have got some pleasure out of it. I have always indulged myself in my writings. I write about people I know and about past incidents.

Mirza Your short stories are full of characters, would you like to tell us about some characters you like the most?

Bond Grandparents in my early stories, people from ordinary walks of life because not many writers write about them. So living in small places you get to know people from different walks of life like the barber, the tailor etc. I have been to Delhi; I didn't find anything interesting to write because it is a busy city and everything becomes impersonal there whereas, in Mussorie hills you know people around you and there is always something to write about because everybody has a story.

Mirza Your writings are mostly autobiographical in nature. Why?

Bond Partly I would say yes. Yes it has been a lonely life in my childhood, teens. So mostly my stories are a mixture of essay and fiction form.

Mirza Have you ever gone back to legends for inspiration?

Bond Occasionally I have gone back to folklore pertaining to hill areas or occasionally to retold legends.

Mirza There are writers for example Khushwant Singh, Mulk Raj Anand, Bapsi Sidhwa who have written on the theme of Partition. Have you ever written about that theme?

Bond Briefly only, because I don't have a first hand experience but, I did write briefly about Delhi which is not far and it was only in the background. Also in a short story called "Playing Fields of Shimla" which comes in a chapter in my autobiography. Scene from a writers life. Not as a major theme.

Mirza In relation to short stories, which Indian English writer do you enjoy reading?

Bond Well, short stories of Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan. Perhaps in recent times, an unusual choice, I enjoyed Satyajit Ray's short stories very much and sometimes in translation you get good short stories like the Bengali writer Budha Dev Bose's, the Tamil writer Ashokamitran's and Quratulain Hyder's. I have read their stories in translation.

Mirza Caste, colour, creed are the social evils and these have been the main themes of Indian English writers. As far as your works are concerned we have seen, only one short story "Untouchable" is on this theme.

Bond Since I write about personal experience and may be because I have

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not come across such evils intensely, in comparison to other writers who might have personal experience of it. If this theme comes in my story it comes very obliquely rather than as a major theme.

Mirza Your writings are especially about Dehra and Mussoorie hills. Would you like to write about other places?

Bond Yes, if I come in contact with other places I would definitely write about such places.

Mirza Did you ever face problems while writing about characters, situations presented in your works?

Bond No, once I start writing I don't have any problems. Usually I have the story worked out in my head beforehand. The characters too will be hatched in my mind. Whether they are real or imaginative, I would see them because I am a very visual sort of writer, so I would very often visualize my stories, characters or episodes in my mind. So, once I start writing it flows quite easily.

Mirza Can you tell something about your art of writing?

Bond Usually I have the plot in my mind. Though the plots might not be very strong, but sometimes, as I go on writing, some changes do take place and sometimes, the ending becomes different. For example, the story "The Eyes Have it." When I started writing the story, it was about a young blind man who tries to find out what a girl in the carriage looks like. It was only when I came to the end of the story that I actually devised a different ending i.e. the unexpected ending in which he discovers through another person that she is also blind. This ending was not in my earlier scheme. It was only when I came to the end of the story that it suddenly occurred to me that this might have been the case.

Mirza How was this experience of writing about a blind person while you could yourself see?

Bond Well, a similar question was asked to me in Dehradun by a blind man who had read the story on braille. He said, "You give a realistic or convincing picture of a blind man in this story. Being blind myself I could appreciate and identify myself with the character," added he.

Mirza What was the inspiration behind this particular story?

Bond I don't think there was any particular inspiration behind the story. It was purely imaginative even though I wrote it in the first person. Sometimes it is autobiographical and sometimes it could be purely imaginative but it gives the impression of being autobiographical.

Mirza "The Boy Who Broke the Bank" is one of your humorous stories.

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In this story the character, Nathu's small and funny sentence that, "I haven't received even my regular pay" becomes the cause for the failure of the bank?

Bond It was meant to be a funny and humorous story. I wanted to show how a chain of events can come into being through some very small incident or remark which can build up a rumour and how a rumour can create a chaos or a minor disaster.

Mirza Would you tell us something about your story "Face In the Night"?

Bond Again, that is very imaginative; it was just that somebody asked me to write a scary story and may be it originated from the folklore which I heard in Lucknow, in which a person crossing a bridge and a person holding a lamp on the bridge has no eyes and no face and after seeing that person, the narrator jumped into Tonga and after coming out finds that he too is with a blank face. And I changed the folktale, putting a school boy in my story.

Mirza One of your early short stories "The Garlands on his Brow", is also a very touching story in which the principal character, Hassan, becomes the victim of time i.e. destiny and age. The story presents an irony of fate, of heroes when they go out of popularity and there is no body to take care of them. Would you share some thoughts about the story?

Bond Well, you summed it up very well yourself. Actually it does show that the glory that comes to an individual, especially sportspersons or men of letters, is very brief and is quickly forgotten by people as it is human nature. It is partly based on facts.

Mirza Another short story of yours "A Case for Inspector Lal", is also an interesting story. When I read it I found that you cherish human values rather than official duties. Would you tell us something about this short story?

Bond Well, I have shown the human side of the police officer and how he puts, in the end, his idea of justice being above the law by letting the culprit go free. Some people are making televised versions of the story; it is an interesting story, not much of a detective type.

Mirza Sir, would you say something about your characters? How do you form them? How do you feel merging your persona in a character while writing a story?

Bond I suppose it is all about empathy. Putting oneself in the other person's shoes or under the skin of the characters concerned and trying to understand how they feel or react to certain situations.

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I guess it is a sympathetic impulse, of empathy with characters or people.

Mirza What do you like to be the effect of your short stories—reformation of society, humour, sarcasm, or satire?

Bond Basically, I am a story-teller. I try to tell a good story and in the process try to reveal something about human nature or the joys and the sorrows of day-to-day living. Occasionally I might have written some satirical stories. I remember I have written "Crow for All Seasons" where through the eyes of the crow I have a satiric look at the human race. In recent times I have written more humorous stories like "A Handfull of Nuts" or "Landour Days" because I find as I grow older I keep seeing the funny side of things or the ridiculous side of things because life is surrounded by tragedy but does also have ridiculous aspects. But, basically I think I have always portrayed the better side of human nature and it is reflected in most of my stories.

Mirza Your favourite stories?

Bond "A Handfull of Nuts" "Crow for All Seasons" children's stories like "Blue Umbrella," "Angry River Night Train At Deoli Thief" "Time Stops at Shamli." And of course my first novel. I think one's first child is always a favourite to everybody, for example *Room on the Roof.*

Mirza In your view, what are the essentials of good writing?

Bond I guess it varies from writer to writer. I don't call myself a great writer—just a competent writer. I think fluency with language is very important; that is something I developed as a boy in my school. As I was a good essayist and I could use sentences and words appropriately and in the right place, not bombastic words. I think simplicity and exactness is important and of course a writer has to have something interesting to write about. And a writer has to have some interest in people, and some insight into human nature. Although we write, to a great extent for ourselves, but, at the same time, writing is an art of communication. So, a writer has to have some reader in mind. You might have an ideal reader in your mind and even it could be the projection of your own self so that you feel that you are talking to someone and that gives naturalness to your writing and a conversational flow.

Mirza Sir, why didn't you marry?

Bond For various reasons. I think I did not like the institution of marriage seriously enough though I am very fond of children and of having a family around. Also during my twenties and thirties

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I was pretty hard up. I think I would have stopped writing and taken a job, so that fear was also in my mind and doing a job from 10 to 5 is also horrifying. I would always find my parents quarrelling everyday and that also has been in my subconscious mind. Even today I hate seeing married couples quarrelling or families breaking up; it does disturb me. So I think I am not sure that I could have been a successful husband because I would not have been a very good bread-winner. It is now only, in my old age, that I am earning a bit of a money; and in my youth it was very difficult for me to make money.

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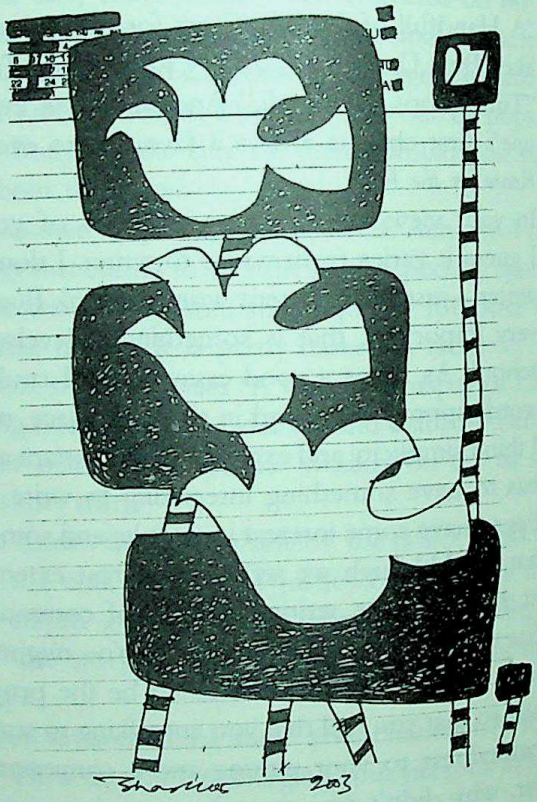

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Utpal K. Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani

Mahesh Dattani has been a well-established playwright, stage-director, scriptwriter and filmmaker. Born in 1958, he started his own theatre company 'Playpen' in 1986. His well-known oeuvre of plays, out of which *Final Solution* earned him the Sahitya Akedemi award in 1998, has been staged all over India and outside: London, Leicester, New York, Washington DC, Sydney, Colombo and Dubai. Besides conducting regular workshops on playwriting and acting in Bangalore, he writes radio-plays for BBC-4. In the genre of cinema, his first film *Mango Souffle* was adjudged best picture in Barcelona Film Festival, 2003 and the second film *Morning Raga* is now on the anvil with Shabana Azmi.

Banerjee : What were your early theatre interests?

Dattani : The first play that I remember going to (apart from the ones at school) was Madhu Rye's *Koi Pan Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo To* in Gujarati. I was mesmerized. I fell in love with the surreal world of theatre in an instant. At that time I didn't think I could ever be a part of it. It was only in college that I heard of Bangalore Little Theatre, an amateur group. I joined the group doing backstage work for them. It was great fun. I was keen to be an actor then. I did small parts but very soon I switched over to directing plays.

Banerjee : What were your sources of inspiration?

Dattani : I think I am inspired by the people around me. I admire people who overcome odds to get what they want. The late Protima Bedi was a source of inspiration. My family, my friends, acquaintances—they have, all in some way or another, figured in my plays. My dance gurus were also a source of inspiration. They were true artists living in a time when dance was not considered respectable. And yet they followed their hearts.

Dattani : Who were your role models?

Dattani : I think Girish Karnad was a kind of role model. He once told

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me that he enjoys doing theatre, and he acts in commercial films for the money. He is the most important living playwright we have in our country. Other models are Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar and of course, Madhu Rye. I also admire Badal Sircar for doing what he believed in. He stopped doing proscenium theatre when he did not believe in it anymore.

The other model was my dad. He was a man who believed in hard work. His attitude was to work till you drop. And that's what he did. Even on the last day of his life, he attended to his work at the office, did the shopping, came home and died peacefully at the ripe age of 82. That is how I want to go for sure.

Banerjee : How did you enter the theatre world?

Dattani : There used to be major theatre festivals in Bangalore in the 80s involving full-length plays and lasting seven days in September-October. *The Deccan Herald* who invited our Playpen to produce a play conducted this festival, now defunct. I directed the Greek tragedy *Hippolytus* by Euripides, on the story of the love affair between Theseus's son and his stepmother Phaedra. I took up Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Paul Zindel's Pulitzer Award-winning play *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigold* in successive years. *No Exit* was liked so much by the then Governor of Karnataka that we did it at the Raj Bhavan, followed by a thumping reception! Next I directed Allen Ayckbourne's *Relatively Speaking,* when one of our leading actresses was expecting, so I added an entire scene to 'establish' her pregnancy! But, all this while, I wanted to do more Indian plays — having been trevelling to Mumbai and viewing plays by Karnad, Tendulkar and Elkunchwar. So that was the genesis!

Banerjee : How did your first play come about?

Dattani : This was *Where There is a Will* when I was 28. I was a little unsure of writing a full-length play and just did a scene with my father. The rest of the play took a life of its own—after my showing it to an actor-friend and going through some play-readings. They encouraged me to finish the play!

Banerjee : Your second play *Dance like a Man* (1987) has been a runaway success, and made into a film as well, with Anoushka Shankar essaying the dancer's role. How did it happen?

Dattani : I have been learning the classical dance of Bharatnatyam for six years, when I was in my twenties, from gurus US Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi. They were already in their

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seventies and frequently talked about the dance-scene half-a century earlier. It appeared that Chandrabhaga had secretly learnt Bharatanatyam from the Devadasi, Mylapore Gauri Amma (also the guru of Rukmini Devi Arundale) and guru Kittappa Pillai. They taught me to have a passion for dance, which coloured my theatre as well! The idea came from there.

Banerjee : *Tara* (1988) was another success story. What was its medical basis?

Dattani : I read the story of separating a Siamese twins, in an American journal. It is also medically true that on separation, one of them is weak, as many important veins and arteries are uniquely shared. Surgical success rate is also low. The only liberty I took was in making them of different sex. Normally, such twins belong to the same gender.

Banerjee : *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1989) was played in the UK. How?

Dattani : It came out of a long workshop I conducted with Michael Walling and was staged in Leicester Haymarket Theatre at Battersea House, before moving into London. It is about two sisters married to two brothers and their mother-in-law. It was my original story and though its relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has an oriental touch, the UK people took it well.

Banerjee : *Final Solutions* (1992) got you the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award. How did it come about?

Dattani : It was Alyque Padamsee who saw my play *Tara* and suggested that I should write a play on communal riots. The story, which was again my original, looks at two Muslim boys who are running away from a mob and take shelter in a Hindu house. But tension develops when the householder suspects that one Muslim boy is having an affair with his daughter and prejudices surface. Incidentally, this was a turning point in my life and suddenly I lost confidence. It became a time of soul searching for me.

Banerjee : How did your links with BBC Radio 4 come about in 1997?

Dattani : Jeremy Mortimer, one of the BBC Radio producers, was in the audience in London where I was co-directing *Bravely Fought*. After the play he approached me and expressed his appreciation. He asked me if I would like to write a play on India's 50th Year of Independence. Karnad had also written *Tipu Sultan* on that occasion. Mine was a comedy. *Do the Needful*, about arranged marriage. Both the boy and the girl don't want marriage

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because they have love-interests elsewhere, but go through it – in a farmhouse – as an arrangement of convenience. Samrin Avens directed it for BBC and the link continued.

Banerjee : You changed tracks with *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998).

Dattani : This time the provocation came from Lillete Dubey, who had successfully produced *Dance Like a Man*. Set in Mumbai, it was about gay people and about how they lived. Then the gay boy's sister discovers that her fiance is her own brother's lover and is the point of tension. The play ends on a positive note, with both brother and sister eventually reconciled. For this play, I observed gay people in Mumbai.

Banerjee : Your second BBC Radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*....

Dattani : This was a detective story, commissioned by BBC, after having received a good feedback from the earlier play. At the centre is Uma Rao, the reluctant detective, who gets to the bottom of a murder case, while working on her thesis on gender studies. She enters the world of eunuchs and discovers a tantalizing pot of love, lust, power, jealousy and enough cruelty. In resolving the crime, she meets her own marginalized self.

Banerjee : Since you have had its stage premiere only in July 2004, do you think it has remained relevant over half a decade?

Dattani : It was done once more as a radio play in Chennai and I think it continues to be still valid. Gender issues are still as relevant as they were yesterday. Also finding one's own gender-crossover is something that the play deals with at an abstract level. The play is from Uma's point of view and traces her own journey, from a submissive upper middle-class housewife, to a more worldly-wise being. I think we are all into role-playing — as somebody's wife, somebody's father — but don't touch the core where we may be someone quite different. Eunuchs don't have such identified roles in the sense and are perhaps more liberated. Indeed, all of us have *Yin* (active) and *Yang* (passive) energies within us and in their balance lies our true identity. My research drew a lot of material from a lady-friend Deepa Krishnan who had lived with eunuchs for three years and did a documentary, *Paper Roses*, on them in 1998. Unfortunately, she perished due to pneumonia as a result of the Gujarat earthquake and we were deprived of her further research.

Banerjee : *30 Day in September* (2000-1) was again on a very different subject.

Dattani : Yes, because this was commissioned by a Delhi-based NGO, RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest), who deals with

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survivors of childhood sexual abuse. After asking me whether I would be interested, they invited me to Delhi to meet some of the victims under counselling. Seven women (covering both young and middle-aged) agreed to speak to me. What struck me was the scar of the abuse and the trauma that stays with you even into your adult life. Some women had benefitted from counselling and found healthy relations in life, including marriage. I also met a man whose girl-friend was the survivor of such an abuse. To deal with the issue, it needed a lot of sensitivity in the way of adult-to-adult relationship. In some cases, there was a sense of betrayal if it involved the father and there was a transferred resentment against the mother who perhaps could have intervened, but didn't. Often it was a hapless mother who had just no power in society, to speak against the father as the perpetrator.

Banerjee : *Swami and Winston* (2000-20) was your third BBC Radio play, wasn't it?

Dattani : Yes, it was basically a thriller with a heavy social content. Here, Uma is again a detective, accosted by an English woman visiting Bangalore, to meet her bother in an ashram. She loses her dog 'Winston' and is very upset. When Uma was engaged in tracing the dog the English lady gets killed. The plot thickens, with everything pointing to the Swami. But the real murderer is someone else. It's a 60 minute whodunit, like its predecessor thriller.

Banerjee : How was *'Clearing the Rubble'* (2001) based on the Gujarat earthquake and after?

Dattani : I belong to Gujarat and was asked to do it by both BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service. Basically, it has three monologues—the first by an English journalist who happens to be there and becomes a rescue-operator; the second, by a young Muslim woman who is buried under the rubble; and the third, by the woman's 14-year-old son who has survived. The mother's soliloquy is a dialogue with the child at the moment of parting, thinking that she is dying and explaining, in retrospect, why there was a rift between them. These are in the nature of 'interior monologues', taking place in the mind. Ultimately, all three monologues connect and become part of one story.

Banerjee : Is not the same technique used in *End Game,* for the old couple interred in the two garbage bins?

Dattani : Perhaps so, now that you mention it. But I had neither read nor seen the play earlier!

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Banerjee : Your latest play has been yet another BBC Radio 4 play. *Uma and the Fairy Queen (2003).*

Dattani : This along with its predecessors *Seven Steps* and *Swami*, complete my Uma trilogy of thrillers. Here Uma goes to witness Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by a visiting UK team, as sponsored by the British Council. The actor playing Oberon does not appear at the end to take the curtain call and is found murdered. His wife playing the role of Titania the fairy queen, is suspected of the foul play. The wife is in real-life the Pakistani girl Mila and the play becomes a web of three countries, UK, Pakistan and India. Finally, the mystery is solved, but Mila is not the murderer.

Banerjee : What are your general comments on your oeuvre of the dozen plays?

Dattani : I am at the stage of life when I want to explore new genres; from detective stories to comedies. I want to spread out. Having worked with gender and sex for 5-6 years, I want to expand into other areas.

Banerjee : What has been your choice of themes?

Dattani : I think my one recurring theme is the individual's struggle over societal demands or inflictions. Whether it is *Dance Like a Man* or *30 Days in September* or *Tara,* my protagonists are striving for their own space or freedom from an invisible, self-inflicted form of oppression. Most of my themes are not by choice, but dictated by my current interests. For instance, my *Clearing the Rubble* was done, as I was profoundly moved by the documentary that Deepa, who was there, made on the earhquake in my State and the sheer scale of devastation. In every case, I do a lot of homework and even if you don't use it all, it impinges on you.

Banerjee : How do you build in your social interests in your plays?

Dattani : I'm strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power-play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leit motifs of my plays. I am, however, not a social activist. From my long experience in theatre, I know what will work in a play, that is, what will be empowered writing. My first service is to the story and I believe that the form should serve the content. Usually, there is something like a coming to terms at the end and the audience can experience a catharsis-like situation. That's deliberate and is part of my craft!

Banerjee : How do you reckon with the audience?

Dattani : I've not been a slave of what my audience expects. But, none-

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theless, it helps to have an understanding of the audience psyche: where are they coming from and why are they coming.

Banerjee : So, what is your worldview?

Dattani : I believe that the world is what we make of it. Just as our actions create our karma, each of us can contribute to the preservation and betterment of our world by creative action. We are all different. But if we create an atmosphere that is conducive to growth and learning different worlds can retain their uniqueness and yet find common grounds.

Banerjee : What are your other projects?

Dattani : I have just completed a movie called *Morning Raga*. In June and July this year, I have been busy with a month-long workshop on playwriting and acting at the India Habitat Centre (IHC). I also directed my earlier BBC Radio 4 play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* for stage that had its world premiere at IHC on 10th July. The play was presented jointly by Habitat World and Scene Stealers, and produced by Vivek Mansukhani.

Banerjee : What is your focus on music?

Dattani : As I mentioned, I studied classical dance (Bharatanatyam) for six years and that was the first time I heard good Carnatic music. I acquired a real appreciation of it. My personal favourites are music trends of the seventies and eighties. But now after researching for *Morning Raga,* I have developed a taste for world music and the kind that is played at the *Buddha Bar. Morning Raga,* with music by Amit Heri based on Carnatic compositions, is in essence world music.

Banerjee : What is your interaction with stagehands?

Dattani : I have made so many friends through theatre and many have started off by helping me backstage. I too started off as a stagehand. That is a great way to learn without your mistakes showing! Prompting for a play is one way of understanding the nuances of a script that may escape even seasoned actors! Lighting for a play requires great skill and understanding of space. It's the area where I have the least experience!

Banerjee : Anything that you may want to add....

Dattani : I returned in June and July 2004 to work in Delhi after several years. I had earlier also done a workshop for playwrights at Habitat and the response had been overwhelming. I hope that I will continue to visit Delhi to conduct workshops and direct plays—the two things I love doing the most!

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Fakirmohan and Lakshminath: A Compatative Study of their Short Stories

Gaganendra Nath Dash

Both Fakirmohan Senapati and Lakshminath Bezbaroa are acknowledged father figures in the worlds of Oriya and Assamese short stories respectively; Both of them have provided solid foundations to this new literary genre and supplied it a more or less well-defined and distinct structural framework having, freed the same from the characteristic features of the similar (yet different) traditional and contemporary literary undertakings like anecdote, tale, fable, sketch, reportage and novella in their respective languages which are genealogically quite close to each other.

Fakirmohan, born in 1843, was senior to Lakshminath who was born in 1868, by a quarter century and died in 1918, twenty years earlier than the latter's death in 1938. So in a way Fakirmohan and Lakshminath were senior and junior contemporaries having lived together for half-a-century.

Therefore it promises to be highly interesting as well as quite rewarding to attempt a comparative study of the literary endeavours of Fakirmohan and Lakshminath, especially their prose fiction, with a special reference to the themes – in the broadest possible sense – of the term of a few short stories (and in the case of Fakirmohan also of a few novels) and various stylistic and technical devices employed in the same.

At the first place the proposed comparative study along with other things is expected to reveal clearly the similarities and/or difference in the attitudes of these two literary giants of Orissa and Assam towards their contemporary Orissan and Assamese societies respectively, in which they lived and worked and which found a very prominent place in their creative works/writings. This must be noted at this juncture that precisely at that time the Orissan and Assamese societies were undergoing great changes – both

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visible and invisible – in response to the challenges from the West and under the colonial system both directly and – which is more the case – indirectly through neighbouring Bengal.

Further, the above study in turn may help to explain the reasons behind the differences (and also the similarities) in the attitudes of both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath towards their contemporary societies, correlating the same with their private lives and personal experiences, which were completely different as will be shown shortly.

Lastly – and that is perhaps even more pertinent – an understanding of their attitudes and explaining the same in terms of their private lives and personal experiences will help to develop an insight into their minds; help to know me ingredients with which their complex psyche have been built and also help to understand (and perhaps appreciate) their highly complex and colourful personalities.

Fakirmohan wrote only twenty short stories in total[1] having published his first story "Rebati" 1898 and last "Gurudi Mantra" in 1916[2]. Although Lakshminath had earlier tried his .hand at writing folk tales he in fact started writing short stories; after Fakirmohan had started writing the same, publishing his first short story collection *Surabhi* in 1909. Lakshminath continued to write short stories after that and therefore for a few years both he and Fakirmohan were active in writing short stories simultaneously in their respective languages.

Both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath had shared many other characteristics as well in their common literary pursuits. It is ironic yet quite interesting to note that both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath, before making their lasting and also epoch-making contributions in Oriya and Assamese languages respectively, made their first literary debuts in an alien language, Bengali. Further in their literary pursuits each of them has made experiments in writing poetry, belles-letters and each of them has written a historical novel (surprisingly pertaining to the later half of the eighteenth century in both the cases) and his autobiography besides showing interest in Sanskrit literature, Indian philosophical systems and in the lives of medieval Vaisnava saints.

Furthermore, each of them has found the themes for his short stories from the lives of simple folks and rural lower and middle class people of his home land (here Orissa and Assam) bringing into sharp focus their sorrows and joys, their hopes and frustrations, their tears and laughter, their hatred and love, their hypocrisies and sacrifices, their customs and superstitions, and also the emotions and passions behind the same, revealing in the process his deep understanding of their lives and society giving realistic touch to the stories. Moreover, each has made efforts to portray the lives of the people in the living language i.e., the day-to-day speech of the very

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same people making the portrayal even more realistic.

It appears that both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath had some kind of social commitment running like undercurrents in their respective works especially in their short stories (and in case of Fakirmohan also in his novels). Both of them have brought into sharp focus the various social aberrations like superstitions, religious rigidity, ignorance, addiction to drinks and/or opium, bride-selling, bribery rampant among the petty officials, corruption at the lower levels of the colonial administration and blind imitation of a new way of life etc. and castigated the same in the severest of terms. It appears as if they made conscious and deliberate effort to expose the social maladies of their time.

Many of the short stories written by Fakirmohan centre around a specific character, representing a class of people, a type. This characteristic feature is shared by many a short stories written by Lakshminath. Besides both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath had another literary trait in common i.e. the proclivity to employ humour and satire most effectively – not aimed at any particular individual but at a class of people, some socio-religious customs and/or any social aberration – as a device or technique in their writings including the short stories in order to make their writings highly interesting as well as to drive their points home.

But there are many differences. Fakirmohan took to writing creative literature seriously (especially writing fiction) at a comparatively late age, when he was beyond fifty, unlike Lakshminath. Again Fakirmohan has written three other novels besides the historical novel mentioned above but Lakshminath has no other novel to his credit. Similarly Lakshminath has written a number of plays in Assamese whereas Fakirmohan has never tried his hand at writing a play.

Coming to the short stories the number of short stories written by Lakshminath is much more than – in fact more than double – the number of short stories written by Fakirmohan. Again as far as the themes of short stories are concerned, while Fakirmohan has set a few of his short stories against the background of shipping and salt industries of his native place, Balasore, Lakshminath has written a few of his stories against the background of the tea gardens of Assam owned by Europeans which is quite understandable. Similarly the opium addiction as well as the conversion to Islam of the Assamese people under social oppression – oppression of the conservative Hindu society – figure among the themes taken up by Lakshminath. But no such theme has ever attracted Fakirmohan's attention, which is also understandable. Besides Lakshminath has given a prominent place to supernatural phenomenon in his short stories unlike Fakirmohan. Further Lakshminath has made wide-ranging experiments as far as forms

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of the short stories are concerned. He has used dream as a technical device and also has endeavoured to reveal in vivid detail the internal conflicts of a character in his short stories. But Fakirmohan's short stories do not share these characteristics. Not only that Lakshminath has made experiments in writing short stories in first person, a stylistic device, which Fakirmohan has not exploited. Again the short stories of Lakshminath are invariably shorter in size.

As far as their private lives are concerned both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath lived in worlds apart. It is necessary to throw some light on that as that may be useful to understand some of their attitudes towards the society and some of the themes of their short stories. Firstly, it may be emphasised here that Fakirmohan died before the First World War was over. But Lakshminath lived till almost the commencement of the Second World War. It is needless to point out that the world between the two World Wars was completely different from the pre-World War world. Secondly, Fakirmohan who was brought up as an orphan boy, having lost his parents at very early age in an impoverished aristocratic family, had to fight against dire poverty throughout his young age and had to earn his bread when even a boy; had little formal education and was even discouraged to pursue studies and only on rare occasions crossed the border of Oriya speaking tracts. Though he started his career as a teacher eventually he rose to the administrative positions of Dewan, Asst.Manager and Manager in different feudatory states of Orissa. In contrast Lakshminath came under the profound influence of his loving father—was brought up in a well-to-do family; was a graduate of Calcutta University and even studied for M.A. and though could not succeed in these ventures. He spent most of his adult life outside Assam and even when he was young had plans to go abroad, to England, for higher education though that could not be realised. But it means that he was looking beyond the borders of India for inspiration. Though he was businessman by profession he was much more learned than Fakirmohan.

Another thing that must be mentioned here is that both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath had great love for their mother tongues: Oriya and Assamese respectively which might not have been reflected in their short stories explicitly. But this love for their mother tongues may help to understand their complex and colourful personalities and their attitudes towards the contemporary society reflected in their short stories.

Against the background of similarities and differences found in their literary endeavours as well as in their private lives – mentioned above – it is now proposed here to examine only two of the several themes taken up by both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath in their short stories (and in case of Fakirmohan also in his novels) a little more closely. These two themes are:

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(i) Superstition, taboo, ignorance, hypocrisy and oppression etc. of the traditional Hindu society.

(ii) Blind imitation of a new way of life by the Western educated young men and their false vanity and rootlessness etc.

These two themes, out of the several, assume somewhat greater importance as these two themes are directly related to the contemporary social situations of both Orissa and Assam, intimately connected with the forces and counter-forces generated by the intense interaction of two cultures with long history and rich traditions: the Western culture which was dominant, and the traditional Hindu culture, which was, to some extent, dominated, at that point of time with their different value systems and attitudes. Both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath viewed this culture contact and the resulting interaction in their respective societies as, on one hand the traditional Indian culture – playing a subservient role – was mainly represented by a group class of ignorant, superstitious and orthodox/conservative people who vehemently resisted and refused to accept even the slightest change in the traditional way of life and on the other the dominant Western culture was represented by a group/class of newly educated 'baboos' who in their effort to assimilate the so called Western ideas and values were merely imitating the new way of life blindly and were in fact exposing, in the process, their own rootlessness. Therefore, in the short stories of Fakirmohan and Lakshminath, the so called representative of the traditional Indian and Western cultures are not the true representative – in the real sense of the term – of the cultures they were made to represent. 'Rather they were only representing or they have been made to represent the aberrations of the two great cultures. After this short introduction on the importance and the nature of two themes in the short stories of Fakirmohan and Lakshminath let us turn our attention to the first of the two themes i.e. the theme of superstition, taboo, ignorance and hypocrisy and oppression etc. of the traditional Hindu society.

Fakirmohan in several of his short stories like "Rebati," "Gurudi", "Mantra", "Bird Bisala", "Dhulia Baba" and "Madha Mahantinka" "Kanyasuna" as well as his novels *Chamaan Atha Guntha* and *Prayaschitta* has taken up this theme.

In order to make Fakirmohan's position clear and show how artistically he expressed his attitude towards the traditional Hindu society let me retell briefly the very first short story "Rebati" by Fakirmohan even at the risk of making a digression.

The story opens with a description of Shyamabandhu Mahanty's family. Besides Shyamabandhu and his wife it consists of/comprises two other members belonging to Shyamabandhu's preceding and succeeding

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generations: his old superstitious ignorant mother and his illiterate ten-year-old daughter, Rebati.

Shyamabandhu was the agent of the tax collector (*gumasta*) of the local Zamindar and for his services he was paid some remuneration in cash and was also allowed to cultivate a few acres of land. He belonged to economically lower middle class of the contemporary rural society. He was a god-fearing and basically good man. In the evenings he used to sing devotional songs and at times recite a chapter from *Bhagabata,* the only listener being his illiterate daughter who could memorise and sing in her sweet child's voice a few of the devotional songs. His small lower-middle class rural world might have continued like that but for the establishment of a school in the village and the arrival of young handsome teacher Basudeba, who was orphan in his childhood as Fakirmohan himself was. He in due course comes close to the family being of the same caste.

When Shyamabandhu learnt from Basudeba that in Cuttack, the headquarters of the province, the girls are taught to read he desired that his ten-year old daughter Rebati should learn to read. Basudeba provided the encouragement and was even prepared to teach Rebati privately. Thus inspiration came from the father and an assurance of active help from the young teacher. This made Rebati very happy. Even the mother gave her assent. But grandmother opposed the proposal vehemently. Her reaction to the idea was really sharp: What, educate a girl! Whatever for? Learn to cook and serve a meal; learn to make delicacies; learn to decorate the house; learn to churn curds. But learning to read, never.[3] It was almost a taboo for women to read.

In spite of grandmother's opposition, the girl learnt to read and in a matter of two years made, considerable progress under Basudeba's tutelage. Even Shyamabandhu and his mother once discussed a possible marriage between Rebati and the young teacher, the girl overhearing it.

Then the cruel fate struck in the form of cholera epidemic. Shyamabandhu and his wife had to die suddenly in a matter of hours. The consequences were indeed far-reaching and grave. The Zamindar not only took away the land Shyamabandhu was allowed to cultivate but also the cows on the false pretext that he was defaulter in depositing the tax collected by him. Bullocks were already sold for the funeral expenses and the ploughman had already left. Help was not forthcoming from the callous village society. Only the young teacher continued to help the family, which was reduced to the level of starvation. Rebati and her grandmother were compelled to accept help from Basudeba reluctantly though they were almost starving. And the old, ignorant and superstitious grandmother held Rebati responsible for the calamity that befell the family. She continued to scold Rebati day

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in and day out for her fault of learning to read. "The old women could no longer see; her vision was gradually impaired because of her constant weeping. And she has gone crazy. Nowadays there is less of moaning and weeping and more of scolding Rebati. The old woman has come to a firm conclusion that Rebati is the root cause of all the misfortunes. Her son and daughter-in- law died, the ploughman left, the bullocks had to be sold, the cows were taken away by the Zamindar simply because Rebati learnt to read. Therefore she must be evil, inauspicious and ill-omened. Above all if the old woman's eye-sight has been impaired and she cannot properly see it is because Rebati learnt to read."

She perhaps also considers the teacher equally responsible for the ill luck that befell the family although she does not say so openly as they would be starving without his help. Under the constant scolding of the grandmother the personality of the grief-stricken girl underwent a complete change. To her the whole world became void and empty. She constantly thought of her dead parents except when the young teacher visited them. Then she looked at him with wide, open eyes and only thought of him. Then five months after Shyamabandhu's death Basudeba too dies suddenly stricken with cholera. That was also attributed to his active role in helping Rebati to read by the superstitious old woman. Basudeba's death perhaps crushed Rebati's will to live. She took to bed and after several days of fever died unattended and without any treatment. And while she .was dying the old woman, who foolishly attributed the cause of the calamity that befell the family to Rebati's desire to read, without realising that Rebati was very ill and about to die, ignorant and affectionate that she was at the same time, sold the last metal utensil that was left in the family in order that she may be able to buy some ration to cook some food for the girl who was ill. But when she finally realised that Rebati had died the old woman collapsed and died too.

As a critic has observed, "Thus in 'Rebati" Pakirmohan (i.e.Fakirmohan) powerfully demonstrates the need for female education and the distress that can result from the lack of it"[4] and further, "This superstitious attitude of attributing misfortune to human misbehaviour engendered almost incredible callousness, not only in the old lady, but in society in general."[5]

Therefore, in "Rabati" Fakirmohan not only advocates the emancipation of women and desirability of education for women but at the same time strongly condemns the superstition, ignorance and callousness then prevailing in the traditional Hindu society.

In some other short stories like "Garudi Mantra" and "Pathoi Bohu" Fakirmohan also pleads for the desirability of education for women and their emancipation. Similarly the hypocrisy and different kinds of oppression

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and deception prevalent in the traditional Hindu society have formed the subject matter of many of his short stories. In "Birei Bisala" and "Madha Mahantinka Kanyasuna" he comes down heavily upon the hypocrisy as well as upon the inhuman and ignoble practice of bride-selling prevalent among the people belonging to certain castes of the society. In "Dhulia Baba" he has exposed: a religious fraud. On the whole in the works of Fakirmohan and especially in his short stories a dismal and decadent picture of the traditional Hindu society has been presented on which he has passed severe stricture.

And most of his short stories have been able to present such a dismal and decadent picture of the traditional Hindu society through a very successful use of satire admixtured with humour and/or pathos. And that has not only made the stories highly interesting, entertaining and successful but also made his points clear and voice powerful.

Like Fakirmohan, Lakshminath in some of his short stories such as "Nistarini Devi ba Fatema Bibi" and "Dharmadhwaja Phaisala Nabis" and also in "Bhomkerala" has presented a decadent and dismal picture of the traditional and orthodox Hindu society where even a small seven-year-old girl Nistarini had to accept Islam and become Fatema Bibi under social oppression. Her only fault was she by chance came upon a Muslim household during festivities and ate some sweet dish, offered to her without being aware of its grave implication. Because of this fault of her, committed unknowingly, this small innocent girl was abandoned by her rich parents and driven out of the house.

Then she was given shelter in the Muslim household ultimately leading to her adoption and conversion. The situation was really very pathetic.[6] In "Bhomkerala," Kadambari could not accept a non-Brahman as a husband although knowingly she had accepted an oppressive and cruel husband. She felt herself so polluted that her feeling of pollution and shame had driven her to set fire to the house and destroy herself. As B. K. Barua states, "The hypocrisy, deceit, vanity, and blind prejudices masquerading as orthodoxy of the higher stratum of society are held up to ridicule in some of his stories."[7] Like Fakirmohan's, Lakshminath's attitude towards the decaying, conservative and oppressive traditional society is highly critical as well as satirical.

Though both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath were severely critical of the traditional Hindu society for its oppression, hypocrisy, back-wardness, ignorance, rigidity and superstitiousness etc. were they really social rebels? As it will be made clear in course of this discussion their rebel image was only an illusion. Otherwise why did they also attack the newly educated class of the contemporary society with equal vehemence, if not more, as well

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be made clear shortly. That brings to us the next important theme in their short stories i.e., the theme of blind imitation of a new way of life by the newly educated class and their false vanity and rootlessness etc.

Fakirmohan in several of his short stories like "Daka Munshi" I and "Sabhya Zamindar" (and also in his novels like *Mamu* and *Prayaschitta*) and Lakshminath in his stories like "Bhokendra Barua" series and also in "Ghantakama Sharma" have caricatured arid made fun of the newly educated 'baboos' of the contemporary society who had had western education, bringing into sharp focus their false vanity, snobbish mentality, hypocrisy, rootlessness and the tendency to imitate everything alien blindly. Here also Fakirmohan as well as Lakshminath, like in their stories critical of traditional Hindu society, have ruthlessly employed satire admixtured with humour and/or pathos in order to drive their point home. On Lakshminath, S. N. Sarma aptly observes, "His depiction of the Assamese gentry is derisive and satirical, but the simple village folk is treated with sympathy and kindness."[8]

As a critic has pointed out, "The western-educated youngman would have absorbed, perhaps subconsciously, a respect for science, logic and reason; admiration for social equality, political freedom and patriotism, and abhorrence towards illiteracy, stupidity, prejudice and backwardness."[9] They had their cultural predecessors in the Young Bengal who emerged much earlier in the neighbouring Bengal under H. L.V Derezio's inspiration.[10] But in Orissa as well as in Assam – quite naturally – their advent was not only late but also had lost much of its vehemence, exuberance and sharpness. In Orissa as well as in Assam the newly educated class emerged much later when Fakirmohan and Lakshminath were young men. Compared to Bengal in Orissa and Assam the newly educated class were less vehement and less sharp in their attitudes towards the old order.

And both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath shared some of the outlooks, attitudes, belief in value systems – mentioned above – with these newly educated young men especially when they passed severe stricture on the traditional Hindu society for its conservatism, superstitious and rigid attitude and oppressive character etc. But in spite of this common meeting ground between Fakirmohan and Lakshminath on one hand and the Western educated young men of the contemporary society on the other, both the authors (i.e. Fakirmohan and Lakshminath) have preferred not to identify themselves with these young men in their short stories. On the contrary they have only found fault with them; have discovered their weakness, false vanity, snobbish mentality and rootlessness etc, which have been subjected to merciless condemnation of ridicule in their short stories. In their short stories these educated young men, Gopala and Rajibalochan in Fakirmohan's works and Bhokendra Barua and Jajnaram Saikia in Lakshminath's works, have been

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painted as only the counterfeits, cheap imitations of, Young Bengal, having been devoid of the philosophical and the rational foundations and the scientific outlook of the latter.

How can this phenomenon, this ambivalent attitude on their parts, be explained; how can this contradiction be reconciled? It may perhaps be argued that both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath – as they were really not rebels but only reformers – have only endeavoured to reform the traditional Indian society, the older order. Alternatively they were only making efforts to bring about a synthesis between the two great cultures, the Indian and the Western, only to accept whatever they considered good in both the cultures while rejecting whatever they thought bad and only aberrations in the same. But both the explanations seem to be too simplistic and superficial.[11]

In case of Fakirmohan it can perhaps be said with some justification that as he practically never had any formal Western education, it was difficult for him to identify himself with the educated young men of his short stories and secondly though he was a rebel in his young days – which is a fact – he could no more remain so in his mature years when he seriously took to creative writing (especially writing short stories) specifically after his only son Mohinimohan, a newly educated young man, married a Bengali girl, of different caste, according to Brahmo rites against his will in 1904.[12] This was certainly a turning point in Fakirmohan's literary career after which he wrote nineteen of his twenty short stories and his novels *Mamu* and *Prayaschitta*, which clearly reflect his changed attitude.[13] He could no more remain a rebel after his newly educated young son's rebellion against him; after his son became a rebel.[14] Though there may be some truth in the above explanation it may be noted that during this period of his literary career he has also not spared the traditional Hindu society for its aberrations and passed severe stricture on the same. How that can be explained then? How can both the positions taken by Fakirmohan at the same time – to ridicule and severely criticise the western, educated 'baboos' and also the orthodox and superstitious people of the traditional Hindu society, the new and old order, at the same time – be reconciled? Further, if Fakirmohan's severe criticism of the newly educated 'baboos' can be explained on the basis of his personal relationship with his son, no such thing ever happened in case of Lakshminath and no such theory can be advanced in his 'case as he himself had not only had formal Western education but also married a Bengali wife, according to Brahmo rites, which only indicates his own rebellious nature. Then why did he, like Fakirmohan, subject the Western educated young men to severe stricture?

Then how can one reconcile the contradictory positions taken up by

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both of them, Fakirmohan and Lakshminath, at about the same time? How can their ambivalent position be explained?

An attempt may be made to explain this phenomenon in terms of the theories developed by anthropologists studying culture contact. Herskovits had earlier observed, "It is essentially out of contacts involving dominance of one people over another that contra acculturate movements arise – those movements wherein a people come to stress the values in 'aboriginal ways of life, and to move aggressively, either actually or in fantasy, toward the restoration of those ways, even in the face of apparent impotence to throw off the power that restricts them."[15] Later Martin Orans greatly revised and refined this when he developed his theory of Rank Concession Syndrome or shortly the RCS theory.[16] Briefly RCS theory explains the forces -and counter-forces that operate and interact when a dominated society concedes rank to a dominant society. When the rank is conceded the dominated society emulates rank attributes of the dominant society in order to raise its status. But that generates another force (really a counter-force) that counters the force of emulation and borrowing from the dominant society. This counter-force or 'the principle of "likeness"' has been termed, following Durkheim, 'solidarity' which really means 'those shared cultural characteristics' that serve to bind a society together. As a member of a particular society always wants to be like other members of the same society, he normally endeavours to preserve the solidarity. Therefore, when emulation indicates rank;, concession it is likely to generate a conflict with the solidarity as the distinctiveness of 'those shared cultural characteristics' serves as, a barrier against assimilation in 'other' society. Oran calls it Emulation-Solidarity Conflict.

Normally wealthier and socially important and powerful persons of the dominated society have comparatively greater opportunity and stronger urge to emulate and borrow as they more often interact with the (members of) dominant society and have greater possibility, of experiencing the Emulation-Solidarity Conflict. If an individual of the dominated society seeks to raise only "his economic status by means of emulation and borrowing then the intensity of the Emulation-Solidarity Conflict is much less than if he seeks to raise his socio-political status. The individual normally finds himself alienated because of emulation (of the rank attributes) of the dominant society and often finds it difficult to reacquire the indigenous customs. Therefore, the Emulation-Solidarity Conflict is much more severe and pronounced in the latter case as that requires recognition by the other members of the society and also their support. This is likely to transform itself into a cultural movement which may be an upsurge of indigenous socio-cultural and literary activities and/ or a tendency to denounce some social behaviour of the dominant society on part of the individual who

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experiences the Emulation- Solidarity Conflict.[17] This literary activity of the individual may reflect the Emulation-Solidarity Conflict as well as seek to resolve the same through several different means of synthesis,

Now Orans' RCS theory, with some modifications18, may be applied in case of Fakirmohan as well as Lakshminath. It appears from a glance of their private lives that both of them had conceded their ranks and emulated the rank attributes of the dominant Western society in order to raise their economic and socio-political status either getting Western education or – when there was no formal Western education – acquisition of Western knowledge independently, in more or less adopting a new way of life and availing new avenues of livelihood and new sources of income. Because of this concession of ranks on their part, they naturally experienced intense Emulation- Solidarity Conflict, without being aware of it, which in turn released very strong upsurge of Oriya and Assamese nationalistic feeling and sentiment respectively in them and also led to a spurt of literary activities on their part. Therefore, their short stories bear the indirect reflection of this Emulation-Solidarity Conflict to which they were subjected. When they pass severe stricture on the traditional Hindu society in which both of them were born ;and brought up, a major theme in their short stories, they only accept the superiority of the Western society over the former and indirectly concede rank and emulate without being aware of it. But that activated the counter- force of Solidarity generating Emulation-Solidarity Conflict. Because of this Emulation-Solidarity Conflict and under the influence of the counter-force of Solidarity activated by their concession of rank and emulation both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath fervently sought recognition and support from the other members of Orissan and Assamese societies respectively, societies from which they were alienated – at least that is what they felt – by conceding ranks. Therefore, the cause of their intense love for their culture, especially Oriya and Assamese languages respectively, and specifically of their adoption of colloquial or spoken form of the speech, the living language of the people19, may be sought in this Emulation-Solidarity Conflict experienced by them. Because of tills conflict they caricatured, ridiculed and made fun of the newly educated 'baboos' of their own societies, the second theme in their short stories, while at same time showing sympathy to the common folk, the other members of the same societies. By that act they were only seeking indirectly the recognition, sympathy and moral support from them and also getting identified with their own societies from which they were alienated by rank concession and emulation. Boulton's following observation on Fakirmohan is quite illuminating, "Phakir Mohan was man with emotional problems, unresolved conflicts from childhood and infancy. He wrote in order to solve them; and in seeking to solve them he

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began presenting solutions to social and political problems ... ."[20]

The Emulation-Solidarity Conflict was even more true and perhaps more acute and intense in case of Lakshminath than in Fakirmohan's case as the former spent most of his adult life outside Assam, had a Bengali wife and his household language was not Assamese. It may be recalled here in this connection thai the challenges from the dominant Western society came to Orissa and Assam not always directly, rather indirectly mainly through the neighbouring Bengal. As Sanjib Baruah has observed, "Given Calcutta's status as the capital of British India – the dynamic center associated with modernity – Bengali language, culture, and fashions were imitated by the Assamese. Assamese students studied in Calcutta, and major Assamese culture figures were exposed to Bengali culture and literature. The doyen of Assamese culture and literature, Lakskhminath Bezbarua, was married to a Bengali woman and was well versed in Bengali literature."[21] His general observation was more or less true in case of Orissa. From Fakirmohan's autobiography we know that in early years he used to write and publish in Bengali. In a way, it was an Anglo-Bengali challenge and both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath were conceding ranks to an Anglo-Bengali society.

Lastly, this approach will not only be able to explain Fakirmohan's and Lakshminath's attitudes towards their contemporary societies but also the apparent contradiction in them as reflected in some of their short stories. Further that will help to develop an insight into their mind and psyche and ultimately facilitate a better under- standing of their works. It also explains why and how both Fakirmohan and, Lakshminath played pivotal roles in the construction of Oriya and Assamese identities respectively. It also explains why and how both Fakirmohan and Lakshminath played pivotal roles in the construction of Oriya and Assamese identities respectively. (This approach will also be useful and this RCS theory can also be successfully employed to understand and explain the apparently curious, colourful, complex and enigmatic character of Utkalagauraba Madhusudan Das, a contemporary of Fakirmohan, who played a leading and quite significant role in the construction of Oriya identity while at same time speaking Bengali with the Oriya speakers invariably always in non-formal situations.

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1. Scholars like Debendra Kumar Dash are not prepared to accept four out of these as 'short stories' while at the same time have discovered about six more short stories written by Fakirmohan but published under pseudonyms. But that does not in any way affect the contention of the present paper.
2. Fakirmohan claims that he wrote his very first story "Lachhamania" first Oriya some thirty years earlier, around 1868, the year Lakshminalh was born, and published the same in a periodical named *Bodhadayini*. But the earlier issues of *Bodhadayini* as well as the story "Lachhamania" cannot be traced and are lostand the'pretise nature of the supposed to be the first ever written short story in Oriya, nay in Indian languages, cannot be known. Therefore, I have accepted here "Rebati," published in 1898, as, the first short story in Oriya.
3. See Boulton, J. V 1993: 349
4. Boulton, J. V. 1993: 352
5. Boulton, J. V. 1993: 351
6. See Dash 2001 for a discussion on such attitude of the Hindu society in the medieval period.
7. Barua, B. K. 1978: 175
8. Sarma, S. N. 1976: 93-94
9. Boulton, J. V; 1993: 329
10. For more information on Derozio and Young Bengal see Raychowdhury, Subir 1993, Sengupta, Pallab 2000, Kopf, David 1969, 253-59 and Bose, N.S. 1976: 69-91.
11. As for example Surendra Mohanty and Hem Barua have offered such expla-

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nation respectively for Fakirmohan and Lakshminath. See MohantyS. 1972: 214-22 and Barua, Hem, 1966:, 5-6, 10. Such explanation in respect of Fakirmohan has been considered in one of my earlier papers.

12. See Dash 1997 "Sec *Utkal Deepika,* May 7, 1904 and Dash 1997:165.71.0000

13. See Dash 1997 where it has been argued that "Prayascitta" bears the reflection of his personal life: his son's rebellion against him as well as his son's marriage against his will. His short story "Daka Munshi" also bears such reflection. For a summery of "Daka Munshi" see Boulton 1993:330-32.

14. See also Dash 1997 where the possibility of this explanation has been considered.

15. Herkovitg, Melville J. 1974, 477

16. Orans advanced such a proposition for the first time in 1959 while studying the Santal tribe. See Orans 1959. Later he refined and further developed this theory in his book *The Santal* published in 1965. See Orans 1965,123-146 (Chaps 8 & 9). He has tried to show how his theory amiough similar but is really different from theories advanced by M. N. Srinivas, N. K Bose and others. Ibid. 137-44.

17. 'Mr. F' of Orans is one such example. Sec Orans 1965:93-97

18. For example Orans has in view an 'encysted' society, the Santal, as dominated society. See Orans 1965: 126,134. But this criterion is not applicable in the case of Orissan and Assamese societies.

19. There might have been other – and perhaps equally strong and compelling — reasons also for the adoption of colloquial speech by Fakirmohan in his literary works, which has been considered earlier. See Dash 1991-92. There is really no contradiction between both the reasons. They might have even been complementary to each other.

20. Boulton, J. V 1994: 6

21. Baruah, Sanjib 1999: 60. Sudhir Chandra refers to Lakshminath's testimony in this connection as revealing. See Chandra 1994:147-48. See also Chandra 1994: 184, Note No.90 in this connection.

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Two Indian Plays: The Oedipus Complex in Counterpoint

(Based upon a comparative study of Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and Sant Singh Sekhon's *Fate*)

Lakhwinder S. Gill

Girish Karnad and Sant Singh Sekhon are modern Indian playwrights writing in their respective regional languages. Apart from being an acclaimed actor and director of theatre and films, Girish Karnad is a path-breaking playwright of post Independence India. Originally written in Kannada, most of his plays have been translated in English. Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997), on the other hand, was a renowned Punjabi playwright. Though he started his literary career as a poet in English yet his plays have remained untranslated. (Now Sahitya Akademi is coming out with *Sant Singh Sekhon, A Reader* in which the editor-cum-translator, Tejwant Singh Gill, has included two full length plays alongwith eight miniature ones). Though belonging to different regions and having specificities of their own, both the playwrights have much in common. Karnad's plays are marked mainly by the existentialist thought of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and, Sekhon's vision is coloured by the Marxian ideology. He views everything from the historical and dialectical view point. As a result a critique termed by him as *nirvachin* (new and renewed interpretation) becomes the hallmark of his plots. But one thing that unites the two playwrights is their fondness for tradition. They derive their stories from their own culture and history and view them in the light of modern sensibility. So, the mythical and historical events become vehicles for modern thinking under the impact of western ideologies and systems of knowledge. As an example, a Freudian overtone is the distinguishing mark of both the plays taken for study in this paper. A discussion of Karnad's *Yayati*[1] in counterpoint with Sant Singh Sekhon's one act play *Fate*[2] seems deeply relevant in this regard. It becomes important in the light

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of what Raymond Williams, one of the greatest literatteur thinks of the 20th century upheld in the following words:

> Greek tragic action was not rooted in individual, or in individual psychology in any of our senses. It was rooted in history, and not a human history alone. Its thrust came not from the personality of individual but from a man's inheritance and relationships...within a world that ultimately transcend him.[3]

The Oedipus tale as it occurs in the Greek mythology has historical and cultural elements inherent in it. The plight of Oedipus cannot be understood by cutting it off from the primitive times, its culture and ethos. The prophecy of the oracle, the birth of Oedipus, killing of the King Laius, Oedipus's marriage with his own mother—all happens in a pre-determined way. The more Oedipus runs away from his ordained destination, the more he gets close to his tragic end. Having learnt at the end that he has killed none other than his own father and the queen he has got with the kingdom is his own mother, Oedipus blinds himself and the queen commits suicide. He takes full responsibility upon himself for what destiny does to him. In this way his complex, with which his name gets inextricably entangled, stands for the impulse to be human, to catch destiny by the forelock and not be subsumed by the blind forces of nature-cum-nature. In his pursuit to know himself he undoes himself. Thus in this tale, past and future are closely knit together –Oedipus's present cannot be separated either from his past or his future.

But in Sigmund Freud's psycho-analysis, the concept of the Oedipus Complex has its face turn to the past. For individual's trouble in the present and future it holds the past, even the pre-natal one, fully responsible. The son starts loving his mother from his very childhood, holds Freud. Rather, the mother is the first object of erotic attachment for the male child. So, to Freud the Oedipus Complex simply implies an incestuous attachment of the son to his mother and the resultant feeling of hatred for the father because, for the child he is an intruder. Commenting on this triangular relationship Calvin S. Hall observes:

> Prior to the emergence of the phallic period, a boy loves his mother and identifies with his father; when the sexual urge increases the boy's love for his mother becomes more incestuous and as a result becomes jealous of his rival, the father. This tale of affair in which the boy causes exclusive sexual possession of his mother and feels antagonistic towards his father, is called the Oedipus Complex.[4]

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From this perspective we see that the relationship between the father and the son in Girish Karnad's play is Freudian whereas in Sant Singh Sekhon's play it takes after its mythical version overloaded with historical and cultural connotations.

In Sekhon's *Fate* the relationship between Maan Singh, the ruler of Gangapur, and his son Vijay Singh, the Crown Prince, seems to border on the Oedipus Complex. Vijay Singh loves Rajeshwari, the queen of Bhanpur, who, having escaped the Sultan's siege, takes refuge in the palace of Maharana Maan Singh. The Maharana has a great infatuation for her young daughter but his own son happens to fall in love with the queen. This triangle upsets the Maharana and the young prince a lot. In order to avenge themselves on each other, both tend to sabotage each other's plan.

As the play opens, Vijay Singh, obsessed with his infatuation for Brajeshwari, desperately urges Vishwanath, the minister, to intervene and persuade the king not to persist in this path. He calls this relationship a 'scandal', albeit 'revolting' because the girl is not even "sixteen years old." In no way does she make a match for his father who is three times her age. For him it is an enormity that his "father over fifty years old, should lust for a girl of sixteen" (P 126). The idea that he seems to stress is the huge gap between the two, as Brajeshwari is of the age of the king's grand-daughter. Terming it "utterly damnable", he urges the minister to "ponder over" it.

The issue of love and sexuality in the play gets further crucial when Vishwanath also admits that beauty bewitches the king and it is his "fate". "He is helpless. After every five years, the grand passion wakes up in him. Such is the fate of his passion. How long it is since he married before the last time? About ten years, on my count" (p 128). Infact falling in love has become a "habit" with him, holds he. At this, Vijay Singh pledges to change the rhythm of his father's passion. But why he is so much averse to the king's relationship with Brajeshwari, and why the king is so averse to the relationship between Vijay Singh and Rajeshwari is an enigma that gets further intractable when the Minister enquires of Vijay Singh the reason why he opposes the king, "Is it that your step-mother is so young or... Brajeshwari is a mere girl..." Vijay Singh reveals his true intention when he comments, "I don't relish his leaving behind a legacy of wretched step-mothers for me. And I am deeply hurt to think that an innocent girl like Brajeshwari is being made a victim of his demonic passion" (p.128). However he fails to explicate the reason behind his own attachment with the mother of the princess. Ironically, he regards Brajeshwari as his younger sister, "rather a daughter". The reason he offers in support of his argument is that she does not look "even sixteen." At no cost is he ready to see her fall a prey to the sexual desire of his father.

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He proclaims that he would rather like her being "slaughtered like a lamb" on the altar of the goddess Kali. The contradiction in his argument and the reason behind his rivalry with his father is pointed out by the minister who holds, "Prince this is not a good omen. You are twenty two and Brajeshwari is sixteen. Your feeling also seems unusual" (p.128). It would have been remarkable, says he, if his father had fallen in love with Rani Rajeshwari. But the playwright makes the position of the Prince untenable when he is shown arguing, "No, not even that. What need has my father to fall in love with a woman..." and the minister comments, "it is not a matter of one's needs. For that matter, nobody needs fall in love..."(p. 128).

The feminine side of sexuality is awarded due representation by the playwright. Interesting aspect of the situation is that Rajeshwari and Brajeshwari are mother and daughter and the persons they love also happen to be father and son in relationship. The mother loves the son and the daughter loves his father. The point to take notice of is that both are in search of a male figure and unconsciously they select the person who suits their emotional needs the most. Rajeshwari finds it in Vijay Singh who is younger and energetic and Brajeshwari in the old king who is powerful. In the place of youth she compromises on power. Perhaps, her fiance's helplessness in the battlefield that he displayed by fleeing from Bhanpur induces her to love the king. The intensity of passion burdened with the sexual jealousy of the two women can be better understood from the "stringent talk" between Rajeshwari and Vishvanath as the latter says, "No, Rana Rawindra's cowardice is not the reason of her being entangled with the king." The real cause, says he, lies in "jealousy":

> But it is not a child's play to disappoint one as beautiful and dignified as Brajeshwari. You have seen the result of disappointment with Rana Rawindra. Can't we bring the prince round to transfer his love to Brajeshwari?...And I know, however strongly the Maharana may feel about it, he will not be his son's rival (p. 132).

But she is not at all ready to accept this solution. Asked to help her daughter, as mothers as a rule help their daughters in alleviating their anguish, she flatly refuses: "I for one can't do so (p. 132). When suggested to quench her "rage", her "jealousy", she retorts:

> Why should she be jealous, why should she resent? (*Breaking into sobs*) Should she be jealous of me...? The prince can't give her that kind of love as he regards her as a daughter. Had I known my own daughter would get

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into rivalry with me, I would never have tried to escape from Jauhar. Now she is offended with me and out of jealousy she is bent on surrendering her youth to that old scoundrel. O God! How harsh is your justice (p 133).

The dialogue between Rajeshwari and Vishwanath further reveals the intricate situation the both have got into:

Rajeshwari : But why does the Maharana thus exploit my daughter's jealousy?
Vishwanath : My master does not know that Brajeshwari is doing it all out of jealousy.
Rajeshwari : Why not? He knows it for certain.
Vishwanath : It is possible he may himself also be doing all this out of a pique. My master thinks of your highness the same as you think of him.
(p 133)

The Irony of the situation is that she loves the prince who is younger to her in age but she can't imagine her daughter loving the old king : "Never, never will I concede that Brajeshwari loves the Maharana." Her jealousy comes to the fore when she screams, "If he marries her I know how to avenge myself" (p 135). To further prove the point it is appropriate to quote Sekhon: "The feeling of jealousy between the mother and the daughter is very powerful in *Fate*, this killing-jealousy is the fate..."[5]

The feeling of sexual jealousy between the father and the son no more remains a secret when the Prince calls his father a "rogue" and the Maharana calls him a "bastard", a "fool" and Rajeshwari "a whore." The father warns him: "And I will not let you sniff at the air that flows touching Brajeshwari's garments!" Physically assaulted, the son also pounces on the father, "You old bull! This is the reward for violating so many virgins" (*he drives the sword into Maharana's chest*). Both fall down dead on the ground and Brajeshwari takes poison. Thus completes the circle of the Oedipal relationship.

But the idea of sexuality gets a different meaning in Sekhon when he criticises the Maharana for whom woman and love is the only and ultimate purpose of life. He forgets his duties as a king and seeks solace in gratification of his sexual urge. Vishwanath repeatedly warns him to "extinguish his passion" and be wary about the fact that "woman are the instruments of fate." But to the Maharana's mind "...love is stronger than fate....." Here Sekhon seems to be apprehensive of the consequences of this tragic obsession of the king. He is ready to pay "too high a price...for love." Brajeshwari loves him and feels he is very brave. Ironically, the prince regards

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Brajeshwari his daughter as she is "hardly sixteen" but the Maharana regards her the most suitable match because she is "over eighteen" in his eyes. The playwright appears to make Vishwanath his spokesman when the latter asks the king to "keep women at arm's length" and makes him realise that "love is the second name of fate. For the sake of the kingdom and its people whose guardian God has appointed Your Highness the sacrifice should be made" (p 137). To this suggestion his answer is "Love is stronger than Fate." And "if this is fate I do not bother at all," holds he. This is how he heads towards his ruinous end and Vishwanath remains only a spectator to the tragedy that is imminent. The encounter that follows between the father and the son is typically Freudian in nature. Admitting the psychological insight displayed by the playwright, Balwant Gargi observes, "I like this play very much—jealousy between the mother and the daughter, inner hatred in the relationship of the father and son, the intense love of both for the mismatched women is the outcome of a deep mental and psychological insight (on the part of the playwright.)"

Such scenes where the father and the son are face to face blaming each other using language laden with sexual imagery are very common in Girish Karnad. His *Yayati* is the representative play in this respect. The relationship between Yayati and Puru also appears to border on the Oedipus Complex. If the Maharana in Sekhon's *Fate* loves a girl who is a more suitable match for his son, Karnad's Yayati, the king, seduces his attendant in the absence of his wife, that too on the bed where his own newly-wedded son and his wife had to consummate their marriage. When he is cursed for this act with old age, his son willingly offers himself to take the curse on his head and as a result becomes older that his father. Significantly, he takes the place of his father in relation to his own mother.

Even as a child Puru has harboured the feeling of excessive attachment to his mother and that of resentment and hatred against his father. When he was away from his mother he always missed her. He admits that her mother's memories always haunted him. He would miss even the room where he used to be with his mother "...my dear room! The room of a few moment of joy in life" (p 42). He always dreams of his mother. Such questions as, "Who was she? What was she like?... (p.44)" defy any resolution by him. In all respects he hints at his attraction for his mother but Yayati fails to understand it. Puru laments that his father never had time to know his inner thoughts. To give vent to his feelings of love for his mother, "he was always restless" (p.41). Puru does not hesitate to tell Yayati that his existence for him is only in terms of his love for his mother. Thus his decision to accept the old age of his father seems to be an attempt towards satisfying the desire of his unconscious mind. "Who was she? What was she like?"

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(p 42), is the question he always poses to his father. He is not reluctant to confess that he has spent his childhood for "that one face"; when Yayati does not give any satisfactory answer, he literally starts crying. Puru's hatred for Yayati is not a secret either. As for Freud the father is always an obstacle between the son and his mother; Puru's hatred for his father is not without meaning. Yayati too is aware of this hostility when he confesses, "Whenever we talk to each other, there errupts a quarrel. Why is it so? This I have not been able to know so far" and Puru "vomits fire" (p 49) seeing him.

The relationship between Yayati and Sharmishtha is that of a king and his pretty attendant. Though she has dismissed her right to be the equal of Devyani — her old friend and the present queen of the king — by meekly accepting her new role as an attendant in the king's palace, yet she has not outright rejected her inner feminine self. She says that she "to had once that scent of youth; I would die for the smell of land that is caused by the first sprinkle of the rain. I would stroll in trees and plants to see a spider weaving a shiny net in the light of the sun (p.21). It shows the burning desire in her to be one with her opposite sex. Narrating the tale of her sexual frustration and finding no outlet for her suppressed desires she attempts to take poison. But Yayati would not let her die. Like the Maharana in *Fate,* Yayati's attraction for the female sex transcends all social barriers and he shares the bed with Sharmishtha, his attendant. As she attempts to take poison he checks her holding her by the right hand. Reminded of the meaning of holding the hand of a strange woman, he withdraws it at once and he orders his attendant to leave. He commands, "Don't let anybody enter unless I myself call" and "sits by her on the same bed" (pp.26-27). In the next scene he is found smiling and Sharmishtha's hair is "spread over her shoulders." Covering her head with her sari, she sits by him. Significantly, this meeting elevates her from an attendant to a queen. Yayati too feels young again as he tells Devyani, "I was feeling old. Sharmishtha has enthused me, returned my youth to me. I cannot leave her" (p. 35).

As the price of the sexual jealousy between the father and the son is paid by Rajeshwari in *Fate,* in *Yayati* the victim of the jealousy is Puru's wife — Chittralekha. She also takes poison like Rajeshwari and kills herself. Chittralekha too is conscious and assertive about herself. She becomes the spokesperson of her husband, Puru. She accuses the king of exchanging his old age with her husband's youth. She pledges not to see her husband in Anantpur until he regains his youth. She lashes out at her father-in-law, "You are the man to push him (Puru) near funeral...and you are advising me without knowing my grief" (pp 73-74). She expresses her inability to hide her real self under the 'mask' of thoughts which he is wearing. As he promises her that he will give the borrowed youth back after fulfilling his

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aim, she questions him, "Can you imagine what will be his age by the time you complete your aim.... I got this youth just for fifteen days before: What are you talking of your six year?" (p 75). She values her present far more than the future of his kingdom and challenges him to accept the reality relating to the youth of her husband: "You snatched away youth from my husband. It is logical that you accept everything concerning it" (p 77). When she realizes that nothing is going to help her she takes poison like Rajeshwari in Sekhon's *Fate*...

Thus we find that Oedipus Complex seems to be the meeting ground between Girish Karnad and Sant Singh Sekhon, notwithstanding the fact that sexuality has been viewed differently by the two playwrights. Sekhon in his *Fate* is critical of the Maharana and his son who are bent on crossing all limits to show each other down in love for women. For them woman is the only issue of dispute, and, for their people and the state they have no vision. From this angle the title of the one act play, *Fate,* is important because for the king and his son woman becomes fate and fate becomes woman. In Girish Karnad the idea of Oedipus Complex operates in a mythical story but his treatment is different. He employees the Oedipal pattern of relationship as such and weaves it in the Freudian sense. But the vision of both the playwrights have value in their own way — as together they constitute an important aspect of modern Indian drama. They may belong to two different languages but they certainly are a part of an important stream of Indian drama.

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Essays on Oriya Literature by John Boulton, Prafulla, 2003, Pp. 215, Rs. 300/ $15.95/UK pound sterling 10

John Boulton is one of the very few Western scholars on Orissan studies, and perhaps the only Western scholar so far to have worked on Oriya literature for his doctoral dissertation. He is mostly known as a scholar on Fakirmohan Senapati, one of the pioneers of modern Oriya fictional literature. Boulton has obtained his Ph.D on Senapati's works. Out of the eight essays in the present volume, four are related to various aspects of Fakirmohan Senapati's works, and the rest four are on Sarala Das, the poetess Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the problem of translation and on the morphological question respectively.

Boulton's essays on Fakirmohan Senapati are marked by the context-analysis, which sets the tone of his discussion of Senapati's novels. For example, in "Fakirmohan Senapati and His Times", Boulton has first contextualised Senapati's time, the socio-cultural milieu of Orissa, language controversy and early rumblings of the Oriya consciousness. This as well as Senapati's personal relationship with his son, mother and uncle influenced his prose-fiction. Boulton has demonstrated their influence by way of thematic discussion of Senapati's prose-fiction under three heads namely, history, education and justice. In a sort of conclusion, he opines that Fakirmohan had one life-long aim, i.e., the translation from Sanskrit, of the value system of ancient India into Oriya either literally as in his *Mahabharata, Ramayana* and *Upanishada* or metaphorically as in his fiction (P.47). In similar fashion, he says that the basic plots of almost all Fakirmohan's prose-fictions amount the same i.e., a person whose way of life was wrong/right was caused to suffer for this and then his way of life changed (P.49). This had bearing on Fakirmohan's troubled relationship with his son Mohinimohan Senapati who, Fakirmohan wanted, to suffer so that the world change for better!

The next essay to locate Fakirmohan's works within the ambit of "Nationalism and Tradition in Orissa..." But some of his observations in this article are problematic like caste being not distinguished in the Puri temple, or division of the Oriya society into right and left, or even his conclusion "Fakirmohan's vision was truer to Indian tradition than that of most leaders of the Oriya nationalist movement". Even Boulton's use of

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the phrase 'Oriya nationalism' is problematic as it is sometimes misleading. The term 'nationalism' is generally used for a country or nation, and in our context its use is reserved for India. What Boulton means by Oriya-nationalism, is the Oriya movement aimed at integrating Oriya speaking territories. His assertion that Fakirmohan was essentially an enlightened feudalist rather than a democrat, because of his alignment with Hindu traditions, requires further debate and analysis. It is difficult to confine Fakirmohan to the narrow, collapsing walls of feudalism, particularly when he has written such progressive stories like "Rebati".

The essay on "Religion in Contemporary Indian literature with Special Reference to Fakirmohan Senapati in Orissa" is very convincing and analytical. Again linking personal experience with literary works, Boulton says that much of Fakirmohan's prose-fiction and especially his three novels, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha, Mamu* and *Prayascita* can be read as a series of lectures delivered to his western-educated, atheistic son, Mohinimohan. In these novels, Fakirmohan has tried to show the dangers posed to the society by the materialistic atheism professed by his son. Boulton also argues that justice and religion provide the main theme of his novels in course of which he has moved away from the temporal law in favour of the eternal law (dharma). Thus the term 'crime' (temporal law) was replaced by the term 'sin' (eternal law). Again analysing Fakirmohan's novels, Boulton opines that on the theme of justice and religion, he has turned away from the Rule of Law to an old feudal system, based on a just and happy life. But this is too sweeping a conclusion, as one has to qualify that Fakirmohan was against the British system of law and justice only because of its evil effects on the Indian society. Secondly it defies logic how a feudal society could be the basis of a just and happy society.

The last piece in the anthology relating to Fakirmohan is "Autobiography in Oriya, 1917-1976". Here, in addition to Fakirmohan, Boulton has discussed autobiographies of Gopal Chandra Praharaj, Godavarish Mishra and Nilakantha Das, three other leading Oriya scholars and writers. Boulton argues that the abridgement of his original autobiography safeguarded Fakirmohan's public image, and helped more in understanding his time, rather than himself. Gopal Praharaj's autobiography is like an authentication of Fakirmohan's prose-fiction, starting from *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* to *Patent Medicine*.Godavarish Mishra and Nilakantha Das, two leading political figures of Orissa had written their autobiographies with much political aura around them. According to Boulton, they will be read primarily for the light they shed on the 20 century political history of Orissa and India. However, an autobiography is always a guarded public statement whereas a work of fiction is free—like the association process whereby the patient unwittingly reveals all to the analyst.

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Of the non-Fakirmohan essays of the anthology, perhaps the most insightful and analytical one is on Sarala Das, generally credited as the originator of Oriya literature. According to Boulton, Sarala composed his magnum opus, the Oriya *Mahabharata* through intuition, common sense and imagination, and as such he was an extremely cultivated author. The immediate context of the composition was the war-torn Orissa during the reign of Gajapati Kapilendradeva in the 15th century. Sarala showed the futility of the civil war in his *Mahabharata,* and struck a warning about the possibility of a clash between the alien Sanskritic culture and the indigenous Oriya. At the same time, he showed the need to avoid that clash through compromise. According to Boulton, Sarala tried to score this point through the theme and counter theme of the *Mahabharata.* It is a known fact that Sarala's *Mahabharata* was an adaptation of the original Sanskrit one, and Boulton opines that his adaptation was greater and more successful than Radhanath Ray's adaptation of Greek myths to an Oriya milieu in his Kavyas. But this assertion seems to be biased as Radhanath's Kavyas are no less popular, and continue to inspire the Oriya imagination.

In this anthology of Boulton, there is one essay on a relatively modern Oriya poetess, Kuntala Kumari Sabat. But Boulton's discussion of Kuntala Kumari focuses on her affair with her paramour. He shows how Kuntala Kumari's verses reflect the development of both her illicit relation and her spiritual disposition. He also discusses the biography of Kuntala Kumari written by a fellow Oriya, Chakradhara Mahapatra who was her protege and regarded by her as a reincarnation of her son from a previous birth. Mahapatra's biography is a free and frank exposition of the strength and weakness of Kuntala Kumari.

The other two essays of the book broadly deal with the problems in linguistics in Oriya and Bengali, one on translation and the other on word-borrowing and word-making. He shows that translation is essentially a two-phase process: one, understanding the original and the other, conveying one's understanding of it through the medium of another language. For Westerners, the difficulty lies in the first phase, and for South Asians in the second. Boulton concludes that translation is the easiest from one literary language to another, but more difficult from a dialect or 'colloquial'.

On word-borrowing and word-making in Oriya and Bengali, Boulton makes an analytical study. He shows how these two processes are determined by the Nature and origin of languages, and their phonological and morphological structures.

This elegantly produced book carries an Afterword by Ganeswar Mishra, which is extremely poor and reads more like a personal memoir. One would expect Mishra's criticism/views on the anthologised essays.

Subhakanta Behera

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Living Other Lives by Sharmila Ray, Minerva Press, New Delhi (2004), Pp. 117, Rs 160.

> What life shall emerge out of nothing the question poses like a line in a play. They know the answer, are afraid to face, while their hands mould nemesis out of clay.

These lines from the very first, title poem, sets the tempo for the others in this slender volume of confessionals. And one must admit that the initial promise is not just a reflex action. It seems each poem is a response to a lived emotion, at times unchisselled, even raw. There is no deliberate effort to conceal a response, thought or emotion. There is no conscious design even to camouflage a feeling however transparent it might appear. Images are allowed to follow almost unhindered even if they hit the reader with an unintended harshness, 'jumping from one time frame to another'. It does not really matter if they are 'marooned between silhouettes?' This is largely because Sharmila Ray always seems suspended between vision and reality. She is constantly breathing in a world animated by dreams. Dreams that almost always work for her. Dreams that are not only imagined but also livable. The –'heat of dreams' propels her to seek their redemption, whether sleeping or awake; whether fantasising or experiencing; whether floating in one or realizing the harshness of another.

Simplicity of expression is an important aspect of Ray's verse. Her images are culled out of mundane, day-to-day existence. There is no tendency to curb the natural flow of thoughts. The scent or rosewood was in the black sheath/like the cloying perfume she sent us from Parish. The hangover of that perfume is evident in several of these personalized reflections transmitted through a multiplicity of direct, easy to grasp images. There hardly seems a poem where questions have not been posed, either by the poet herself or others without necessarily providing or finding answers that can open up some hidden floodgates of knowledge or information. And although some of these questions can be arguably called self-inflicted perceptions (at least where the reader is concerned) multiplicity of them does not always succeed as poems. 'Face to Face' is one such poser. Here 'identities' fall off. 'Stark naked' queries, with or without 'a shadow' are 'everywhere'." They seem to fit into a pattern but put together they do not succeed as poems. Not at least the manner in which Ray intended.

And herein lies her inherent-problem. The problem of constantly

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trying to be direct, to move without a pause, disallowing any surfacing of emotions. Verse such as this invariably lacks solid foundation. The structure always stays but it disallows a window to let in fresh air. The problem is further compounded in the absence of extended vocabulary. This rush to achieve an effect, without pause or reworking of emotions, results in repetition of image–clay and protoplasm recur with haste that's often a weakness in confessional poetry that only Kamala Das, of all Indians writing in English, managed to achieve as strength. But then her lines almost flow like an exposed volcano. Ray will have to work harder on both her feelings and lines to achieve that maturity of expression. The drift from first person to third person is invariably achieved without any specific effect. One could always be replaced by the other in Ray's poems. That could also be due to an unconscious rashness in completing one and rushing to another thought.

There is a certain aroma about some of the love poems. Ray again makes no attempt to, consciously at least, load the lines and metaphors, spelt to explicit feelings by any extra or inverted delicacy. Her approach is matter-of-fact, the take-it-or-leave-it variety. And this sometimes tends to weaken the expressions themselves. 'Siphoning images out of your flesh/you steal fuel for self-love or she walked straight to the mirror/watched her expanding elaborate self/and surveyed the thoughts/savage, solitary all hidden in her loins.'

The preoccupation with self in several poems seems to convey a certain longing, a certain search, both within and outside, for a lacking sense of belonging in love. There is an overpowering missing need for identifying the force that lies buried beneath the surfeit of unexpressed emotions. That's, perhaps, why there is an extra effort at using imagery that is harsh as well as direct. And this is a recurrent factor in what would, in the absence of a better expression, be called love poems. The opening lines from "Body Melody?" speak for themselves:

> Suddenly, you would take shape
> out of nothing, in the semi-darkness
> of my bedroom and I would be
> absorbed in you, turning the
> last corner of maturity.

From darkness to light, as if to say, from fantasy to realization in rapid succession, from a thought to its instant mutation:

> Outside the city with its hybrid colours
> and tyre-burning stench

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wouldn't bother me.
I would only see the mosaic on your body
as the sunlight faded and
velvety shadows covered me.

And then comes the familiar drifting, the drop from poetry to prose, the fall from the sublime to the somewhat ridiculous, from the metaphoric to the philosophic, diluting the flow of a sort of divine bliss that renders the poem weak, before recapturing the rhythm:

The rustling wind with its
fiery tongue would trail
along the goblets of my breasts
and the clouds' blankets
would cover our primeval forms.
Then suddenly you would hold me
exploding in red blossoms
and I would be rising in you
to strike the life chord
before sinking in the melody of crackling bones.

The point of warning, the need for circumspection is not far to seek if only Ray makes a conscious effort to achieve a greater intensity for her emotions in verse. The choice is between knowing about 'frozen relationships' and 'gliding undisturbed' or closing eyes and say

I wish to remain
that way inside the
dear sleeping body, arouse
by touch, discovering night
and day and summer tide at noon.
I am no prisoner, but in love
with the body—that catalyst which gives
variations to the soul.

Suresh Kohli

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Day's End and Other Bangla Stories, edited by Amiya Dev and Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta, Srishti Publishers and Distributors, Delhi and DSA Programme, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2003. Pp. xii+ 206. Rs. 250/-

The Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, has been actively promoting the concept of comparative literature in India for several decades now. The notion of comparative literature inevitably involves literature(s) in translation and precisely for this reason the department has been encouraging studies in the theory and practice of translation, and actual translation involving Indian and foreign languages as well, more recently as a part of its DSA programme. The current volume grew out of three all-India workshops organised under this programme. It features fifteen notable writers of Bangla fiction, including such stalwarts as Parshuram, Satinath Bhaduri, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Syed Mujtaba Ali and Ashapurna Devi. Each one of the stories selected for the volume is interesting in its own way, highlighting some important aspect of Bengali life and ethos. Readers in Bangla have been familiar with many of them, and now, thanks to the commendable effort of the translators, they will be read and applauded by readers in English as well.

The title story, "Day's End" is a strangely premonitory one that leaves the reader wondering about the vagaries of existence and the role of the supernatural and the uncanny in real life. Rati barber had a five-year old son, Panchu who was born after his mother had to throw away "three dead sons from the delivery room into the bowels of the river (Kamda)." Obviously the parents were very solicitous about Panchu's well-being, covering his body with "numerous charms, amulets and talismans and various semi-divine weapons." One morning Panchu woke up from sleep with the terrifying pronouncement, "the crocodile will take me today." His mother's heart is filled with foreboding, but his father, though anxious, dismisses it with contempt when the village zamindar and his lackeys make fun of him for entertaining the idea that the river Kamda can have crocodiles in it. Rati takes his son for his daily bath in the river; nothing happens. Slowly the fear that has frozen them throughout the day melts away. However, in the afternoon when Panchu dirties himself while eating jackfruit, Rati takes him to the river for a wash and sure enough the crocodile appears and takes Panchu away at an unguarded moment. The readers are masterfully led up to the denouement without the author giving away anything till the chilling end. Another chilling story in the volume is "Bait" by Narayan Gangopadhyay

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which deals with the bizarre hunting passion of Rajabahadur N.R. Chowdhuri who uses human children as baits to entice a royal Bengal tiger.

Manik Bandyopadhyay's "The Artiste" presents an admirable portrayal of Madan, the weaver of exquisite sarees, who prefers starvation to sullying his art by weaving sarees of an inferior quality. Madan is torn between loyalty to his craft and responsibility towards his family. He is unable to compromise and herein lies the tragic depth of his character. "Parashuram's Axe" by Subodh Ghose is a powerful indictment of the conventional morals in the society through the agency of Dhania, a common prostitute, who demonstrates that she is far more capable of human compassion than the so-called "bhadraloks" who have always taken advantage of her. The story also throws up complex questions of gender (in)equality and the double standard practised by the society in matters of morals and ethics, a theme that has been dealt with more explicitly in Ashapurna Devi's "Sacrilege."

Jyotirindra Nandi's "Lord of the Forest" is a deeply affectionate story about a city dweller's bonding with Nature and countryside, exemplified through the relationship between Sarada Ray who has left behind a luxurious life in the city of Kolkata to make the salubrious countryside his home, and his grandson Moti, who has come to spend his vacation with him. Ramapada Chaudhuri's "Bharatvarsha" presents an alternative aspect of the countryside, i.e., poverty of a dehumanising kind that has made human vermin of the entire Mahato community.

The strand of humour in the Bangla short story has been very strong and each generation of writers has regaled the Bengali readers with its own brand of humour. One is delighted to see at least three stories in this volume belonging to this sub-genre. In fact, the volume begins with "The Meadows of Bhushandi" by Parashuram, known for his quaint, sometimes grotesque, humour. Here we have the shrew of a wife (the conventional peg for many humorists), Nrityakali, whose "tongue wouldn't stop easily once it had taken off," and her repressed husband, Shibu, whose "inability to tame his wife earned him sobriquets of coward, effeminate, monkeyface etc. from his neighbours." Nrityakali chases her husband even after his death and does not allow his spirit a moment's peace in the nether world. "Birth of a God" by Shibram Chakraborty graphically describes the elevation of a stone on the road to the status of a god and people prostrating before it for the cure of smallpox when, ostensibly, all modern medicines have failed. It shows, deploying a tongue-in-cheek mode, how our pretension to scientific progress and development is only skin-deep and how, faced with a crisis situation, we tend to regress to superstition and the world of mumbo-jumbo. "Customs Duty" by Narendranath Mitra deals with the sheer

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ingenuity of Lalmohan Saha, a petty trader from Faridpur in the (then) East Pakistan, bent on hoodwinking the customs police by bribing a beggar, Champa, to pretend to be his wife, a role which the hired woman plays with gusto and verve.

Mujtaba Ali, who introduced humour of a different flavour in Bangla fiction, is represented here with "Brine", where the predominant mode is irony (and not humour). His is a classic tale of fraternal perfidy and betrayal that evokes deep pathos. Another story built on irony is Satinath Bhaduri's "The Dacoit's Mother". The relationship between the mother and her son as portrayed here is deeply touching and the writer shows his consummate skill in depicting their human aspect that overshadows their seamier side.

Both thematically and stylistically, the volume offers a wide variety. The translation from Bangla to English has been uniformly felicitous, and the translators have often been able to retain the twang and tenor of the original even while working through the current English idiom, a target that the editors had set for themselves and achieved in a large measure. The volume, I am sure, will be widely appreciated, and will find its place in courses on Indian literature. I have only a minor dissatisfaction with the bio-notes, which could have been more comprehensive, and not merely limited to the writer's corpus in the short story genre. As the volume is targeted at a non-Bengali readership, readers could have better appreciated the stature of a Manik Bandyopadhay or an Ashapurna Devi in the tradition of Bangla fiction if the notes were more elaborate.

M. Asaduddin

Dark collection to poems by Susmita Bhattacharya translated by Joe Winter, Sunbun Publishers, Delhi.

"Dark"—a collection of poems written in Bangla by Susmita Bhattacharya and translated into English by Joe Winter is the latest in a series of Susmita's poetical works. While the present collection is an excellent work of translation one still feels that the full flavour of a poet's work can best be filtered through a number of translations done by different people. Joe's translation, excellent read by itself, at times, falls short of the original impact, especially as Joe keeps the original's rhyme-scheme and rhythmic pattern in toto. Other translations perhaps, can fill up a lacuna here. To take just one example :

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In oyster-shell and coral
upon your mounted shelf,
expensive, beautiful,
a curio, myself,
.....
I forget oh I forget
the life there was to tell
where the ocean utters yet
it's song, unfathomable,"

("Curio" Joe's translation)

"Oh your mantelpiece, I
stand, the best decoration,
an elegant, expensive curio
Made out of coral, sea-shell,
.....
I have forgotten, yes, I have
forgotten this dead shell
was once alive, and beating
to the music of bottomless sea,

("The Curio" Rajlukshmee Debee's translation)

Of course, the debate regarding faithfulness versus creativity in translation has been endless. To retain the poetic spark, the translator/transcreator may take liberties. The question is: how much and exactly where?

Undoubtedly, a major part of these translations have been rendered beautifully by Joe Winter, with the meaning intact and the rhyme-rhythm skillfully preserved. I wish I could quote from "Lost Atlantis", "Bonsai", "Summerflame Tree", "Wayward" etc. But that would leave one no space to evaluate the poems for what they are in the original Bangla, and to what extent they get reproduced in English.

Much of Susmita's poetry is a paean to Feminism: Feminism that is not a mere cult, but a life-or-death question in the society vitiated by gender-discrimination in all forms, at all levels.

The feminism of which Susmita avows to be a priestess, had developed in her mind over the years. From a romantic longing for lost individuality "Lost Atlantis," "Curio," "Bonsai," etc. Susmita moved to a hard-hitting exposure of cruel facts about the loss of identity for a woman "Mask", the eternal wrangle for male domination as against the woman's birth-right to freedom, Khanaa. In "Final Encounter with the Supreme Male" (the original title, faithfully rendered in Susmita's own translation reads, "Fifth Encounter with Purushottama". I endorse Susmita, because

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it is conjoined with the myth of Dashaavataara) the lines explode with the protest and righteous anger of the subdued female :

In the last days of Kali
We meet for the last time, here at creation's end.
Today your face has no divine mask.
Today my face has shed its veil of devotion.
Today my eyes flame with hate.
As scorn switches to astonishment in yours,
Astonishment to anger.
Now, fury is ablaze
In your eyes. Hatred in mine
The fires meet and the skies are full of lightning,
The forests are on fire, the seas are on fire
You are turning into ashes, I am turning into ashes
An inferno makes an ash-heap of creation

[Joe Winter's translation]

This is one of Joe's best translations; probably it helped that there was no constraint of rhyme and rhythm in the original Bangla 'free' verse.

"The Would-Have-Been Girl Child" is another hard-hitting poem that focuses on the existing illegal practice of aborting female embryos. Another myth-related poem "Yogmaya to Yashodhara" echoes similar sentiments :-

They say,
'Into the sky your daughter faded away.'
Then know — my young skull was smashed. It was done
to buy a life for Krishna, Vasudeva's son.

[Joe Winter's translation]

It is interesting to note (and comment) that the myth of 'Dalim Kumar', a prince who rode his winged horse over 'shell-mountain and bone-mountain' to reach his land of dreams, was working in Susmita's mind from the time of her first book, though the poem "Fairy Tale", making the myth explicit, was written later and finds place in her second collection.

I heard from my window the Bangoma's,[1] call:
pick up your weapons, your lance and your brand
ride on your Pakshiraj,[2] it said to me.

1. Bangoma: Mythical talking bird which inspired princes for adventures in Bengali fairy tales.
2. Pakshiraj: mythical winged horse, used for the adventure.

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beyond the Sun's realm there is yet a land
which across the seven seas waits for thee."

(Excerpted from *Selected Poem* translation by Susmita Bhattacharya)

I am tempted to put Joe's translation of this stanza, side by side, with the above.

"I heard a magic cry, the bangoma-bird outside my
window-sill.

.....
"Take up your sword and lance," it said to me,
"and speed on Pakshiraj-until a land
beyond the sun's reach and the further sea
lies all to hand."

Dark is perhaps not a feminist poem in the strict sense. But, to my mind, the sense of desolation in this beautiful piece comes from the anguished heart of a woman lost, without hope, in an alien world. The refrain, "I am alone", is the key note to the misery of the female, desired to be shut out of man's dominion unless she forgets her personal identity.

There are also in the volume, poems of other feelings and of rare beauty "Your marvelous name" is a sort of an ode to Rabindranath. "To Create" is about the mysterious process of creation. There are silhouette like "Summerflame Tree" and "Sikkim 1 & 2" and even a half humorous poem "To a Pickpocket."

The stark cover of *Dark* matches the dominant mood of these poems. The printing is faultless.

Rajlukshmee Debee

Birthright by Vaasanthi, translated by Vasantha Surya, Pub. by Zuban, pp 147. Rs 195.

Birthright documents a few days in the life of its gynaecologist protagonist Mano, though a lot of her life has been archived in the novel through her reminiscing them. For example, her mother, whom Mano both complements and outgrows in the novel, is no more when the novel begins and

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comes in flashbacks. Even Mano's grandmother too has a clear presence in the body of the novel, interacting in Mano's memories. Thus the novel has a larger extent for contents—revolving generations, irrespective of its apparently limited inner fillings of a woman physician and her maternity clinic.

The narrator-protagonist, Mano, is a young lady gynaecologist, the only child of a feudal father. She refuses to marry her sweetheart Shiva, until he agrees to come and stay with her. The novel opens at this point. She performs female foeticide, because her clients do not want girls. She carries out abortion, irrespective of the gender of the foetus.Young widows who are, afraid to re-marry on account of social taboo, become pregnant.

Throughout the narrative, Mano is trying to prove herself to her father, something she has to do *because* she is a girl. Shiva eventually agrees to give up his practice in the city and come and live in Mano's house, when her father questions her right over the house. When Mano's father suffers from a heart attack, Shiva sneaks in to gain his favour. The ultimate rebuff of Mano is to the sexual advance of Shiva because she suspects that he is after the property, or perhaps because, she wants to assert her right in sexual matters too. The goddess Mangamma a victim of *sati,* is central to the spiritual milieu and comes to Mano's rescue finally: 'From now on I won't do such things. I've taken a vow. Last full moon, during the pujai, Mangamma's spirit came and said that from now onwards all the girl children who are born in this clinic are going to bring great prosperity to their parents' homes" (p. 146), she explains to her illiterate patients. And thus Mano thinks that she has triumphed in her feminist battle when she refuses to carry out female foeticide: and believes that she will have the right to light the funeral pyre of her father. The right, available to a son only, is the ultimate gender equality.

The author, Vaasanthi, is a best-selling Tamil writer. This first-person narrative is highly readable, almost racy, given the series of events packed in all of 147 pages. The narration is credible and spontaneous vis-a-vis Mano, the protagonist with her urban, educated pan-Indian appeal and steers clear of the tonal tension of a post-colonial literary piece. No words are wasted on anything except the central theme of a woman fighting for her equality in a man's world. There is a turn of events at the end of almost every chapter, almost essential to a best-seller. There are some brilliant paragraphs like the one that describes Mano's dream to light the funeral pyre of her father, even when he is alive yes dream, not nightmare, and her father's corpse running away from her, because this is a son's prerogative. The author has spared a great deal of space in delineating minor characters.

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If you are familiar with the issues that concern and preoccupy Indian feminists, then you will perhaps notice that the novel slots almost all the major issues, in its short narrative span. If you do not like to read essays, this book is a good introduction on Indian urban feminist issues. The feminism is manifest, one-dimensional and expressionistic. The problem with such works is that because they are politically correct, they escape critical scrutiny, either as literary works or from the point of view of realism. Such works can relapse into the decadence of Marxist literature or pop culture.

As an example of my concern for realism, let us see the issue of female foeticide. Female foeticide is peculiar to the urban, high-income, and educated areas in the country. *Birthright* is set in rural South India where the female-male ratio is not as bad as elsewhere. Most of the pregnant women do not come to hospitals, until it is a critical delivery. The government floated a scheme for encouraging hospital delivery. When less than ten per cent of women come to a hospital for delivery at all, where is the question of scanning, and then female foeticide? In matriarchal societies, and in communities where women earn, female foeticide is out of the question. Therefore, the setting of the novel in a rural area, with female foeticide as the core issue is not entirely supported by ground realities.

Besides, female foeticide is not an issue of gender only. It is an issue of money and greed; is related to dowry, which involves economic considerations. People in certain apparently civilized conditions do not want girl children because it costs money. This lends credence to the claims of the Marxist-Feminist thinking, that, analysis of reality through gender difference, without regard to economic issues, is bound to be shop-worn psychobabble.

Contrarily, the problem of female foeticide remains unsolved primarily because it has been hijacked by the feminist movement. Had the issue been taken up against an overall value system of humanity, as, say, vegetarianism, that has been highly successful as a movement, it would have perhaps met with a different fate today. The text suffers from the same structural infirmity. In fact, this happens to most of the creative works that pick up a politically correct value statement. After all, Mano has become a post-graduate doctor, and had been abroad, no doubt, with the support of her father, when her mother and grandmother had opposed so much her college education. And in more than one instance, the protagonist acknowledges this, though possibly inadvertently: "To me Appa appeared to be the only generous one of the lot, and so I became motivated by a greedy desire to grab his entire attention." But we never get to know the father, even if we deconstruct his silence. It is absurd that Mano did not know that her father owned a spinning mill until Shiva lands up there. Mano does not take up

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a basic health check of her father even when he returns from the trauma of cremating his friend. In this dogmatic narrative we do not get to have a point of view of the father at all and with him Mano is trying to establish a relationship, which is also the core theme of the novel. She labels the normal, geriatric tantrums of the old widower to be male chauvinism! Well, her wars against him do look Quixotic at places: against values that are no more valid.

Let me elaborate a little more on the fixity of these functioning stereotypes. Mano's grandmother echoes the dialogue of another grandmother in an Oriya short story "Rebati," written in 1899 by Fakirmohan Senapati, a powerful story on the loneliness of Rebati an adolescent rural girl, "What is all this reading, di! You are just a girl! A female!... The fellow who'll hold your hand tomorrow will ask you if you can boil rice!" (p. 20-1)

By the way, it is acclaimed by critics to be the first modern short story in Oriya and Senapati is the first modern fiction writer in Oriya. Though not labelled a feminist story, Senapati, unmistakably, has empathised with a young woman's desire to get educated. The inflexibility in the idiom of these two characters, separated from each other by a century, may be explained in terms of what Helene Cixous, the French feminist, would call 'feminine writing' — writing that is typically, and characteristically feminine in style, language, tone and feeling and completely different from (and opposed to) male language and discourse. Yet, art, normally, must have scope for evolution, and any literary dialectic that evidently precludes this possibility and straightjackets aesthetic practices, makes its literary strength suspect.

The translation is good. This also indicates that the idiom in the source language must have been equally convincing. As a matter of fact, the translator observes: Vaasanthi has a commitment to write in the popular idiom, and her Tamil is eloquently simple. The Tamil words *appa, anga, dosai, vanakkam*... remain in original; but they grow with the reading, and create the right environ for the reader. In the latter part of the text there are some footnote marks [but no footnotes] suggesting that the original manuscript had footnotes. The English text is much better without them; and the editors are to be thanked for this.

Lipipuspa Nayak

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Dreams and Desires : Seventy Poems of Mohan Singh, Translated by Tejwant Singh Gill, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2003

Popular interest in Punjabi literature has been fuelled by at least three factors: India has a Prime Minister who is a Sikh, the Golden Temple has recently commemorated four hundred years of the *Granth Sahib,* and last but not the least, Punjabi is now one of the official languages of Delhi State. The earthy tones of the lyrics and the robust imagery of traditional *"tappas"* may be hard to translate into the sombre cadences of standard English, nevertheless Tejwant Singh Gill's rendering of Mohan Singh's poetry encourages entry into a world of limpid sensuousness. See for instance the lines from "Pothohar Lass":

> With a bale on her head
> With dancing steps, swinging her waist,
> Sister's blessing she invokes,
> And holding me by the arm
> Whom endless woes have engulfed,
> She carries me across them all
> That Pothohar lass. (p.23)

The title *Dreams and Desires* is conjugated along the lines of the writer's persona being philosophical and self-reflexive, and the object of gaze being transcendent and sparkling. Considered in theoretical terms, it is an equation fairly operative in Romanticism of the old school but given the predilections of new critical theory, one looks for a more dynamic exchange between actor and agency. Tejwant Singh Gill does not disappoint that search. Investing Punjabi lyrics with contemporary English idiom is no mean task, and the success rate is impressively high in this collection. As Gill says in his forthright "Introduction", "a contrapuntal sort of translating strategy has been devised...the focus is always on rhythm, utterance and discourse, rather than on diction, metre and syntax (xvi).

To language then the reader's attention is drawn and through it to the subjects. Broadly, the poems dwell upon the themes of love, memory and nature. From the time of Mohan Singh's first collection, *Saave Patr* (1936) to his last volume, *Buhe* (1977), Punjab underwent cataclysmic change in its political identity. The Partition is an obvious fracture, the evolution of statehood and patriotism remained a veritable challenge. The role of religion, social formation and caste provide the contexts for many vivid portraits of village folk, nascent leaders and aspiring writers. We receive an image possibly

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true of Punjab even now—of an energetic society in a condition of flux, grouping and re-grouping in myriad configurations. Embedded in such dynamism, the poet captures eternal moments and framed vignettes.

The locale of Punjab sings forth in lines such as these:

> I set my cot on the plain ground
> Then the eastern wind begins to blow,
> Without any effort to close my eyes
> In body and mind relaxed I lie.
> On our well does God abide. (p.5)

Furthering such a sense of place are the poems on a mango tree in the courtyard (p.17), the ripe millet crop in *savan* (p.79), and a clump of withered *beri* (p.24). There is also a celebration of the landscape of Punjab chanting names that may resonate as a new mythography: the Khyber, the Sirsa, the Lakhi jungles and the Sirhand trenches (p.14). One may recall here that Punjab is the land from where many migrants traverse to other locations. Carrying the memory of place, seasons and cultural practices is a way of strengthening associations with the home left behind. Mohan Singh's poetry occasionally speaks about the tender links between the old village home and the "foreign" shores. Given the current discourses on "borders and boundaries" and the "narratives of home" where the idea itself is imbued with complex nuances of "belonging", Gill's translation can introduce authentic voices.

Setting off such particularity are the several poems titled "Memory" innovatively described as "a caravan of honey bees" (p.64), a "hearth-woman" with a sickle in hand (p.76) or more conventionally as a bird on "golden wings"(p.81). The relationship of such imaging to the corpus of Wordsworthian accounts of "emotions recollected in tranquillity" is worth a conjecture. Mohan Singh was, after all, a teacher of Persian at Khalsa College, Amritsar, a premier institution of learning in the 1930s and intellectual hub for nationalist and literary debates where discussion of political and literary trends would be common parlance. Many poems in Singh's collection use rustic people akin to Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" or "Michael" thereby highlighting a creative tension between the artist's imagination of the Romantic "other" and an acute sympathy for the dispossessed and the marginal. Mohan Singh's account of a "She-Peddler" (the phrase is awkward) describes her as with "a basket of sorrows" (p.88) and Nanki amidst "cows and buffaloes" awaits the benediction of a Nature God (p.33).

Equally directed towards comparative reading are the poems explicitly

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Marxist in ideology and content. "Rosenberg" (p.85) mentions the trial and hanging in 1953 in America of a couple accused of espionage during the notorious MacCarthy era. The news is received in Punjab through the radio. A weary intellectual makes a tenuous link with the episode and wonders about his own uncertain future. A trifle forced one would say on the scale of realism, till one turns to the poem, "Taj Mahal". It is not the beauty of marble that is celebrated but the "horrible scene of toiling masses" who were "lashed" and "coerced" into service that is bemoaned (p.37). The anti-establishment stand of such poetry and also the intellectual reach of the writer are adequately displayed. However, these are examples of ideological angst which neglect attention to aesthetics. Such writing disappoints. Not that the "Writers of the Left" as Daniel Aaron called them, are inartistic, but in Mohan Singh's formulation the political allusions have no connection with Punjab.

Ultimately one might say that the personal voice and "desire" in the poet Mohan Singh wins out over his strategic arguments. Re-structuring Punjabi lyrics into "Ghazals" and "Songs", so titled by the translator T.S.Gill for reasons not immediately clear in the English versification, some endearing passages of soul-searching keep free of heavy baggage.

> A wall accosted me whichever way I went
> The door was closed, whichever home I approached
> Never was there weather temperate enough to stay
> Either too hot it was or too cold the day (p.104)

Or, witness the update on Omar Khayam:

> The potter has framed the pot
> On the rotating wheel of the sky,
> Evening's crimson-coloured wine
> Is ready for a sip, if you are nearby. (p.95)

In short, there is a fine tapestry of words in this translation of seventy poems; a fitting tribute to one of Punjab's less visible writers. That Mohan Singh was associated with the eminent Sant Singh Sekhon and Gurbachan Singh Talib places him within a literary movement which granted Punjabi a distinct identity. That his own output was substantial becomes apparent from the volume presented by Gill.

While I would praise the academic effort of Tejwant Singh Gill, my dismay is with the cosmetic appearance of the volume. Designed and published by the Punjabi University, Patiala, one would have expected better production quality. There is no background note on the author or the

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translator. The jacket is a garish pink, green and purple. Every page has an overdone ornate border. *Savan* and *Sawan* appear in different spellings for the same word (pp.78, 79), and lines are sometimes out of alignment. Small trouble one might say but in the era of marketing, the literary content needs attractive packaging, specially if this book is to reach a discriminating readership.

Malashri Lal

Her Story So Far: Tales of the Girl Child in India; Compiled and edited by Monica Das, Penguin India, New Delhi, Pp194, Rs.200/-

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"It is well established that girls in many countries and continents experience the 'apartheid' of gender from the time they are born."

This is how the editor of the anthology *Her Story So Far: Tales of the Girl Child in India* begins her 'Introduction' and moves on to empirically analyze how "their fundamental rights to nutrition, health care, education, equality in access to opportunities and, often, survival, are restricted or even denied, and they are considered easy prey to physical and emotional exploitation."

Compiled and edited by Monica Das, who teaches in Delhi University, the blurb claims the anthology showcases the most sensitive fiction on the subject of the girl child by India's finest writers—Mahasweta Devi, Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, Vaidehi, Indira Goswami and others. As if to uphold the banner of the blurb, Monica Das painstakingly weaves a maze of up-to-date and alarming data regarding exploitation, physical and emotional and gender and class prejudices to describe the plight of the girl child in India. In doing so, she goes into such acute details that boy child begins to look dangerously villainous and the chief agent behind the degradation of the girl child in India. The editor then waves before her readers a statement that only a university teacher can dare. "Creative practice invariably imitates life, and literature is always a true reflection of the society that it is a product of." Without stopping just here, she adds—"What is remarkable is though these stories originate from different linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds, all of them are concerned with a common objective —to portray the truth about the status of the girl child in India..."

Trusting Das's advice I read the entire book but found very few stories true to her grand Feminist design. Most of the writers in the anthology are

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not trying to prove what the seemingly deceptive, journalistic title of the book seems to sell out. The book offers a very disturbing picture of the university scholarship today.

For example, in Mahasweta Devi's story, the heroine Shanichari's saga of exploitation does not merely depict the state of girl child in India but the whole scenario of radical tribal uprising and the process of industrialization that ruins lives of people senselessly. In the end, instead of blaming the Gohomukhi who hurls her into the hearth of prostitution in Kolkata brick kilns or seeking revenge, Shanichari worries about the fate of the illegal male child who wouldn't be accepted in the tribal community. Similarly Ismat Chughtai's famous story "The Quilt" speaks less of the young girl child's plight but more of the lesbian relationship that her aunt has with her female servant. In Indira Goswami's story, it is the male character Krishnadeo's memory that triggers the urge of complete woman in the heroine's marital life. Kamala Das' "A Doll for Rukmani" doesn't merely "deal with the trafficking of the girls and total disregard for their safety for diseases and unwarranted pregnancies," as the editor would want us to believe. Kamala Das weaves a poignant tale of man-woman relationships, exploring the nucleus of humanity even in the extremely debased human relationship. The way the atrocious Inspector finally abandons the plan to convert the teenage Rukmani into his private harlot and accepts her as daughter, turns out to be the crux of the story. Like the Inspector of "A Doll for Rukmani" in almost all the stories compiled in the collection the male characters play pivotal roles in liberating the women from the shackles of corruption and orthodox norms. In Fakirmohan Senapati's "Rebati" it's the father and the fiancé who strive to educate the girl whereas the fiendish Grandma opposes their move to liberate the girl from illiteracy. The writer's focus seems to be not on just the plight of the girl child but the devastating impacts of the cholera epidemic that triggers the final disintegration of Rabati's life by consuming her father and fiancé. Amrita Pritam's story is not girl child exploitation but about the conflict between tradition and modernity. The writer here tries to capture the psychological shock that Daropadi, leading the pious role of a virgin Kanjak goddess at the age of sixty, gets as she sees her cousin having physical relation with her fiancé.

Most of the stories do not attempt to explore "gender constructs that pervade every stage of a girl's life."

The formula of celebrating the spirit of the girl child seems to have spoiled my independent reading of these marvelous stories. *Her Story So Far* seems to be democracy's apple cart toppled by the shrewd characters of an academic plutocracy.

Yuyutsu R D Sharma

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Her Stories: 20th Century Bengali Women Writers, edited and translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta, Srishti Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2002. Pp. 195+xvi.

Her stories, a collection of eight contemporary women writers of Bengal, spreading over 195 pages, could have very well been called 'Our stories'. The editor and translator, Sanjukta Dasgupta has probably decided to foreground 'gender' by selecting a personal termination that bears the sign of 'disowning' of women typically shown by the patriarchal Bengali society. This, in a subtle way, contrasts with the vocative strategy in naming a gendered story "Ai ladki" that Krishna Sobti may have done in Hindi. But I guess there is something about the presentation of these stories by the editor Sanjukta that justifies the non-intimate pronominal in the third person. She has not only added a valuable introductory essay of 10 pages stringing the tales together, but has included a brief sketch of each author before the story. The sketches are followed by what she has termed 'Response' by the authors who have been anthologized.

Many western readers being initiated into the world of women writers of Bengal for the first time would, however, have one complaint about the biographical notes. While the page of introduction before each story is rich in making them aware of the context in which the author has taken up the pen, it lacks the meticulous details one would often like to have about the author's writing career or about her preparations or provocations for having chosen this career. It also appears as if the authors have worked backwards from a questionnaire supplied to them by the editor, rather than each conversation "emerging" on its own. As a result, some conversations (or a few questions in the same conversation) have become mechanical whereas others are refreshing. Further, it is often the case that spontaneous exchanges during a serious discussion cannot simply be transcribed. They need to be suitably edited to eliminate hesitations and hedging. Otherwise, we get constructions such as the following stand-alone semi-sentence, such as "As the dream never materialized. Still, I feel...," (Minakshi Sen and SDG, pp 156); or consider a huge and unwieldy sentence like this: "But with the sudden and untimely demise of my husband, a man larger than life, who was my dearest and closest friend, philosopher, guide and everything else to me, and with whose help I, a woman out of prison after a long spell, started a new life and began writing to express herself, all my work stopped" (ibid, 158-9). Anyone with English as mother tongue would find it difficult to process.

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I have a feeling that some of these interviews were conducted in Bangla, and then rendered into English. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the contradictions that have crept in here. Consider Mahasweta Devi's statements where she first argues that translation of regional literature into Bangla "is really necessary. I love to translate regional literature. But it has to be from an English version. Thus, there's the possibility of losing the flavour of the original," and then again she says that culturally different texts can be positively received by readers who are not familiar with the source culture. She says, "I do not see why not (sic?). We have read world literature of many languages through English translations and that did not stop us from getting to know them." (Mahasweta Devi and SDG, pp 29-30). Also consider Bani Basu's statement (pp 67): "Eminent teachers in English such as....were all teachers of English."

Coming to translation of stories, one has to admit that this was a tough job. Since Sanjukta was dealing with different kinds of Bangla, she had to devise different strategies. However, she made no secret of Indianness of her English prose-style here. Her deployment of idiomatic expressions that are typical of an Indian writing in English can be easily seen in sentences like: "Sumita's appearance was nothing to write home about" (pp1), "social work on a locality basis" (p 45), "there will be such a to-do about it" (p 146), "The ears buzzed hearing such speech" (p 144); or in her coinages of "aunts-in-law" (p 1) "younger-in-laws" (p2), "distant sister-in-law" (p3) "betel-leaf canister" (p 4); and in her use of hybrid compounds like "reddish paan juice" (p 14), "ceremonial *phulsajja"* (p 15), *"dokta* case" (p 15). At times, she uses Bangla culture words as they were, without even attempting a translation; e.g. *shoshurbari* (p 13), *dokta* (p12), rice *and daal* (p16), *mini tangra* fish (p 34), *puchkas* (p 73), *dhania patta* (p73), very loose *shakha, ruli and loha* (p 79), the *Poushlakshmi puja* day (p91) etc. But in some other cases, she tried some kind of glossing, e.g. 'nut-and-lentil paste with raw turmeric' (p 20), 'nightly intimacy' (p22), 'watery gravy' (p34), 'hot fish gravy' (p 34).

As the translator and editor rightly pointed out about the common characteristics of these stories in her preface, "Many of these selected stories...prioritize the *well-being* rather than the *ill being* of women in varying degrees, in an ongoing process of negotiation" (p vii). All these women are found negotiating with the society for their own space.

Ashapurna Devi's "Opium" highlights the addiction of security that marriage offers even when the unevenness of the ground on which Sumita and Sudhi stood is known to the readers. Towards the end, Sumita's own point of view and the urge to return to security find a voice in the 'pen' that assumes the position of a cinematic eye or the role of a *suutra-dhaar* in the Indian tradition of story-telling. The quips and comments in the story

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provide the most interesting links. One enjoys following the footsteps of the way Sumita's thought-processes walk along; e.g. "How garrulous!" thought Sumita (Pp13) "Strange! Had Sumita ever seen him in this light before?" (p130), "How vulgar! How crude" (p 14), "Was Sumita alive? Was she still standing with her feet on the ground?" (p 19). The irony of a married woman is brought out subtly when "Sumita herself felt surprised thinking of how she could have spent such a long time in such a place" (p 23), and yet, at the end, using the stormy night as a ploy, she wrote to Sudhi, "I'm missing you intensely." This she did, knowing fully well that her husband would not understand any other mode of expression.

In contrast, Anita Agnihotri sets up her tale in a real-life setting of the NBA movement—spearheaded by a celebrated woman but often 'drowned' by the selfish middle-level leadership who were supposed to protect the interests of the hundreds and thousands of affected women and men. Here, we are told how newspaper reports hit upon the chance discovery of a plot of a local political patriarch who is ready to put everything, including his career as well as love and marriage on the chess-board of politics - and yet not pay the minimum respect due to the woman who he had fallen in love with. We find Nazmin, turned into Amrita here, finally seeing through the plot of her husband—Sanjoy Deshmukh, and making up her mind to deflate his political ambition. However, finally what gets reported in the newspaper by Sowmya was only the preparations for the mass upsurge but not the silent revolution that took place in the Deshmukh family.

The disenchantment of the protagonist, Krishna in finding her four other friends surrendering to various pressures in life in their middle-age, having been battered by unexpected and inexplicable problems such as amoral relationship, undesired motherhood, depression, cheating and sexuality, makes a very interesting story of the women today. The fact that it ends as the five-some decide to break the shackles and fight, makes it even more vocal about the resolution of the women's issue.

Suchitra Bhattacharya concentrates on marital relationships of two women – the stereotype of a bad woman who makes use of her sexuality to earn her livelihood, as against the other — a married woman (called the 'good woman' here) who is affluent but trapped in her bondage of family life. Their lonesomeness brings them together. It underscores the point that howsoever educated and free today's married women of the upper class may be, they are often subjected to — or, rather, forced to have sex with their husband's on their terms. Marital rape is a highly debated subject among all the issues related to feminism, and the author brings it out succinctly through Urmi and Samiran.

The frustration of Sharoma in Nabanita Dev Sen's story had to do with the concept of motherhood, and Sharoma's realization of the real face

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of her husband as his extra-marital affairs come to light after so many years of marital life. As Sanjukta rightly says, "Sharoma's resistance was about agency and power and thereby can be regarded as a postmodern Bangla story that breaks fresh ground" (p. xii).

Meenakshi Sen and Joya Mitra have one thing in common, which has to do with their having been subject to the repression of the state apparatus which contributes to de-humanization of the human being. That is why Meenakshi's "Mookh" (or 'Face' as it is called in translation) tells us the story of a middle class woman's longing for a human face of her society. It is a chronicle of the lives of so many individuals (Margaret, Bhagwan Singh, Puranjoy, and so many others — nameless faces) in the prison, who have been subjected to dehumanization by the society. In constrat is, Joya Mitra's story about a jail inside a jail for women like Shanto who are ultimately tamed in their familial life, unless they can lead to a rare uprising as she had shown by murdering her husband, Haridhon Kuila. A high point in the text is Sanjukta's rendering of idiomatic expressions in English. Once again, the issue of marital rape is foregrounded. That her opinion about educating the girl child had no value in the patriarchal society was realized by Shanto very soon. Her name implies 'quietude' or the 'peaceful one'—but she was the one who became violent at the end.

In comparison with all other stories, Mahasweta Devi's story "Chinta" focuses on a class about which the mainstream middle class knew very little. It was the group of domestic women workers who earned a living in the city but who came from villages. It was a vivid story of how Chinta managed herself as well as her two girl children while working in different households. It was also a story about her selling off two girls as if they were a commodity, and finally returning to the village to ensure smooth life for her legal son.

There is no doubt that the anthology – *Her Stories* has filled in a void –both in the field of literary translation and also in respect of gender studies. The interesting divide it offers, between writers who were born in the colonial period and those who grew up in the post-colonial times only adds to the quality of the collection. Sanjukta has also highlighted the logic behind the title of the volume : "The title *Her Stories* not only seemed to be apt but also clearly brought out the two-tiered structure of the selection. Each story is not only a creative narrative, but narrates and translates in some ways the creator behind the creation." (p ix).

Except for some minor editorial gaffes and spelling errors, the anthology is a refreshing book as it adds to our understanding of the way women authors of Bengal think as they portray life and legends of our times.

Uday Narain Singh

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Saheb Bibi Golam by Bimal Mitra, translated by Subhash Chandra Sarker and Sucharita Sarker, National Book Trust, New Delhi, India, 2004, Pp. 634, Rs.170/-

The book reads like a subtle interplay of two resonances in exquisite counterpoint, in its graphic depiction of the lavish lifestyle in a feudalistic system degenerating into its inevitable doom and a new social order with the trappings of modernity spearheaded by the nouveau riche, vying to fill the vacuum. Caught in the slipstream of two contrary forces is Bhutnath, aka Atul Chandra Chakraborty, popular as Shala Babu, the protagonist who cannot be labelled the conventional hero. The story unfolds through him; he is the narrator and also the participant, more dazed than dazzled by the seemingly endless procession of characters and events. While the landlords squander their unearned wealth, the ladies wallow in their smug satisfaction though finding themselves at the receiving end. A retinue of servants and dependents remain at their disposal, kowtowing to the wishes of their masters.

Thumbing through Bimal Mitra's magnum opus, I am reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum, "Reading is the synthesis of perception and creation". In reading one foresees; one waits. "He foresees the end of the sentence, the following sentence, the next page. He waits for them to confirm or disappoint his foresights. The reading is composed of a host of hypotheses, of dreams and awakenings, of hopes and deceptions. Readers are always ahead of the sentence they are reading in a merely probable future which partly collapses and partly comes together in proportion as they progress, which withdraws from one page to the next and forms the moving horizon of the literary object." Sartre's analysis fits well with the experience of the reader here, looking at the sheer magnitude of the run of events and the kaleidoscopic coverage of the changing times peopled by staggeringly diverse elements. It is a moving account of virtually a society in microcosm, caught in the throes of transition.

The narrative style is simple but arresting and so engrossing and realistic that a whole lot of people appear to have been lifted out of life and put into a book. But the converse is not true, we cannot make them come out of the book and meet us, unless, of course, we are able to enact an equally well-written play based on this work. The story is set in a historical perspective, against a backdrop of wide ranging political, social and religious landmarks in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century when Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal. Religious reform,

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particularly the Brahmo movement, its re-percussions orthodox Hinduism, references to Raja Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Vidyasagar, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda's call for national awakening with a humanistic spirit, the *Gita* and the Upanishads are all woven into the narrative as also the revolutionary struggle for freedom with the fervent echoes of Bande Mataram, Aurobindo Ghose, the Chapekar brothers and a host of other contemporary characters and events jostling through the pages.

Fact and fiction have mingled together as inextricably as a shuffled pack of cards. The title itself, in fact, is suggestive of the metaphor of playing cards, reflecting the fluctuating fortunes of the people involved. Literally, it means the master, the wife and the servant. The attention is focussed on the Choudhury household and within it on Kaustubhmani, the youngest brother and his beautiful wife Pateshwari known as Chhoto Bouthan or Chhoto Ma. At the centre-stage, however, is Bhutnath, a humble outsider who has taken shelter in the Borobari, the palatial mansion of the Choudhurys. His proximity to the Chhoto Bouthan makes him privy to the strange goings-on in the joint family, particularly her traumatic privations amidst plenty, behind a glitzy facade of high life. Hiranyamani Choudhury, the second brother, is the dominating figure whose decision is final in all matters, the eldest having died earlier. All the Choudhury brothers are womanizers, the youngest one indulging in epicurean fits and drinking bouts with reckless abandon. They do not believe in spending the night at home as it is supposed to go against their manhood.

The story bristles with cruel and unexpected twists of irony. Though the male members are addicted to wine and women, their wives are not to stir out of the house and entry of outside males in the household premises is a taboo. Chhoto Babu, in fact, brazenly argues with his wife that it is an established rule of the Choudhury family that the men will pass their nights out carousing with other women and maintaining mistresses while the wives will have to remain indoors and observe chastity. Pateshwari secretly goes out with Bhutnath only to secure a sure cure for her ailing husband but is brutally killed for her unbecoming conduct and audacity. Bhutnath, later, as overseer, has to demolish the very house where he had taken shelter earlier after coming to Kolkata from his village in search of better prospects. He had a secret desire to marry Jaba and is disappointed when Supabitra seems elated to marry her. But when Bhutnath comes to know that Jaba has already been married to someone else in infancy and that person is none but Bhutnath himself, he denies himself the opportunity, while asking a reluctant Jaba to marry Supabitra against her wishes. His selfless and self-effacing character shines through the entire novel.

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Translating a tome of such magnitude is a stupendous task mainly because ethnicity poses a major challenge. What with a mind-boggling plethora of items of daily and customary use, joint familial relationships, terms of endearment, rites and rituals, foods and drinks which are all region and culture specific, attempting their recast in another linguistic form to suit a different class of readers, could be a translator's nightmare. It is difficult but essential to ensure a faithful rendering of the original while retaining its readability at the same time.

Despite the heavy odds, however, the translators have done a commendable job. Moreover, by making available to large sections of the English knowing non-Bengali readers a timeless classic which has not lost its appeal despite the fluid readership profile, a valuable service has been rendered, especially because competent translated versions could help to promote a pan-Indian literary sensibility while throwing open the regional riches to the receptive readership worldwide. There is much to look for in India's literary treasure house beyond Tagore and Premchand. Surprisingly, it has become trendy in certain circles to look down upon regional writing in India as a pariah in the great literary domain supposed to be dominated by English.

The English rendering has brought out touchingly what is almost central to the whole story, that is, the complex relationship between Bhutnath and Pateshwari Bouthan, while delineating the nuances of their growing mutual affinity. Bhutnath often wonders what is his relationship with her. Is his feeling for Bouthan only of respect? Nothing else? She, on the other hand, feels that none is so caring and thoughtful about her well-being as he. At one stage, she tells him, "When I die, Bhutnath, you must cry a little for me. The thought that someone will weep over my death is like a balm." The sight of her skeleton at the site of demolition later, however, does not move him to tears, because by then he has experienced a new kind of awakening, a new feeling of one's own self, inspired by the words of Subinay Babu, Jaba's father, "Know thyself." But Bhutnath stands there for a long time, as one possessed, looking at that skeleton, ruminating on life and death. Death seems to be 'but another great manifestation of life itself'. Bhutnath becomes 'one with immortality through a strange process.' It is a great work, elegantly produced and reasonably priced.

M.N. Chatterjee

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Country of Goodbyes by Mridula Garg translated by Manisha Chaudhry 2003, Kali for Women, Delhi,

The authenticity debate has been central to translation activities from the very beginning. The value of a translated text was, and still is, largely determined in terms of the original. The content, theme, language, style and a host of similar features form the judgmental rubric of the translated text. But such a premise of evaluative criterion is being increasingly dismissed and what is being recognized is the fact that translation is indeed a transcreation as there can never be a one-to-one correspondence with the original. The process of translation becomes a complex one since the translator is caught between the interstices of two cultural spaces governed by the material, historical conditions that find articulation through the medium of language, which is itself determined by its indeterminacy, making the act of communication increasingly difficult but nevertheless possible. Having said this, I choose to read *Country of Goodbyes,* Manisha Chaudhry's translation of *Kathgulab,* orignially written in Hindi by Mridula Garg, as in terms of transcreation and thereby potentially an autonomous work.

The structural organization of the novel weaves in the stories of five different individuals in search of an identity that is not only evanescent but also ephemeral as the tradition-bound cultural fabric of their lives makes the very quest of meaning itself a meaningless endeavour. The feeling of nothingness pervades the novel and, according to Sanskrit poetics, what can be termed as the governing Rasa here, is Santa Rasa as described by Abhinava Gupta the ninth Rasa with its attendant Bhavas. The word *Santa* is often translated merely as peace, keeping in mind the Greek aesthetic notion of the end of tragedy as the 'calm of mind when all passions spent' but here it is the peculiar stillness of the soul that has realized the potency of the universal Brahman in which individual angst, strife and tribulations can be submerged in a unity with the eternal rather than the mundane. The lives of Smita, Marianne, Narmada, Aseema and Vipin form five different sub-plots that interweave due to Smita and talk to each other to reflect as well as articulate the central metaphor of the *kathgulab* or the wood roses that keep recurring as a leitmotif in the novel. The urban milieu and western education invests the major as well as the minor characters in the novel with a deep sense of alienation except Aseema's mother referred to as Ma ji and Narmada. Smita peculiarly becomes the protagonist not because of her formal importance as a character who holds the narrative together in circular time rather than the linear, but because she is the only one who has a kind

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of pre-vision from her very childhood as to what her engagement in life ought to be. Like the smiling poignancy of her name, she is that aspect of the primal principle who has the triadic impulse of the life-giver, sustainer as well as the avenger/destroyer. Marianne is her counterfoil and in these two stories the orient and the occident find a point of convergence as well as divergence in terms of the existential counterpointing of essences in the natural as opposed to the civilized order of things. The ravages on the body of both marked by rape – physical as well as spiritual – could be read in symbolic terms rather than the manifest as the stories of "Ruth from Spain, Elena from Italy, Susan from Scotland and Roxanne from Poland" (P. 66) in the novel *Women of the Earth* written by Marianne but published in the name of her husband Irving Whitman in a technique of the story within the story. One is reminded of Virginia Woolf's polemical discourse on women's writing in *A Room of One's Own* here as a similar argument is seen taking shape as a host of references are given in order to show how the female voice has been subsumed and stifled in the patriarchal tyranny of a system in which women hardly ever had any space. With all the emancipation movements for 'liberation' and 'equality' in the West, has there really been any qualitative change in the lives of women is the fundamental question that is being posed. And what remains to be answered is, if not, then, why?

The debate that is central to gender issues in the postcolonial context is regarding the path that is to be taken in the cultural contexts that are so dissimilar in terms of history and tradition as well as economic, social and political connotations with regard to America and Europe that we happily like to put under a monolithic construction of the 'West'. A critique of the western enlightenment is distinctly seen taking shape in the last three stories that holds the novel together and if one is irritated by the fire-breathing, bra-burning kind of radicalism of Aseema, the unlimited one, one is equally troubled by the mechanical rendering of the young medical student Neerja who takes to pursuing gynecology as a subject as she finds herself unable to conceive and there occurs a rupture in the lives of Vipin and her, as they find that communication becomes progressively difficult and ugly as lineage and continuity are seen in the physical act of bearing a child rather than the spiritual. Similarly, characters like Namita, the elder sister of Smita and her illicit affair with Aseem—the brother of Aseema who is referred to as "bastard number two" by her, Choti Ma, the second wife of Aseema's father, Ganga, the elder sister of Narmada who earned her living by working as a maid in the houses of the well-to-do and enjoyed the friendship of Ma ji and even Aseema and Neerja, are much like the truncated figures of western feminist discourse who become aliens in their own contexts like the activists in RAW, an organization that provided relief to abused women not

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really understanding either the nature of the abuse nor the kind of succour required to heal the wound inflicted by a society that was falling apart from the centre. Opposed to this, the character of Narmada comes forth as a strong indictment of western feminist discourse and her bonding with Ma ji (or Darzin Bibi) as well as the children of Namita, her invalid husband, her mentally challenged brother Bawla and the children of her sister Ganga, reflects a different kind of power that the Mariannes and the Aseemas and even the Smitas of the world lack. The interesting link of Narmada to all these women including Neerja is their inability to bear children and it is this disadvantage that she interestingly turns to an advantage unlike her sister who had mothered a brood with their common husband, and uses it as a kind of strength to oust the woman-hater, wife and child-abuser, much like the revenge goddess that we have in the Hindu pantheon in the different forms of Kali. Narmada is therefore able to take care of the paralyzed Sahib (Namita's husband) and forgive the insults inflicted by him on womankind in his ignorance of what the true meaning of life really is. Vipin's story and his relationship to his own widowed mother and his search for her in the figures of the women with whom he interacts professionally as well as personally, and his correspondence to nature makes him unique as what he parallels is the principle of Purusha that seeks union with Prakriti to fulfill the dharmic code in continuation with the legacy of the past.

The schematic treatment of the Aseema and Vipin story fail to fulfill the purpose that it sets out to achieve. The English title *Country of Goodbyes* in a similar manner fails to convey the poetry inherent in the notion of the *Kathgulab* or woodrose that the Hindi primaraily seeks to portray. Although Manisha Chaudhry's power of rendition is unique and there are passages in the novel that inevitably leave an indelible impression in the mind, as a reader one feels that more justice could have been done in the conclusive part of the novel so that the idea of 'moksha' or liberation that is being hinted at all through the narrative could have found a better aesthetic treatment rather than a reversal into an alien mode of reform as the panacea of all evils whereby the fallow land of Godhad (like the barren wombs of the women characters) would find fruition through the Vipins' of the world who seek to become a part of the process for change and renewal in an unlimited zest for life.

Anuradha Ghosh

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Sharma, R.D. (Yuyutsu). Indian-English poet and publisher; has several collections of poetry. Add: Nirala Publications, 96-B, Krishna Kunj Colony, Laxmi Nagar, New Delhi 110 092.

Shauq, Shafi (b.1950) Kashmiri poet and critic, author of over a dozen books; presently Professor & Head, Department of Kashmiri, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal, Sringar 190 006

Singh, Udaya Narain (b.1952) Maithili poet, playwright, critic and linguist; recipient of several awards. Add: Director, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Manasagangotri, Mysore 570 006.

Sitaram, Shashank (1953-1994) Konkani short-story writer and playwright; was also a stage actor and director, radio artist and social worker; his publications include *Nabat, Prasna* and *Parigh*; recipient of Sahitya Puraskar of Kala Academy, Panaji, Goa, Kala Academy's Award, Kulgaon Lekhan Puraskar, Sahitya Akademi Award etc. Address of his legal heir: Smt. Swati Shashank Shirodkar, Kareswado, Sadashivgad, Karwar, North Canara, Karntaka.

Srivastav, Parmanand (b.1935) Hindi critic and poet; has several poetry collections to his credit. Add: B-70, Awas Vikas Colony, Suraj Kund, Gorakhpur 273 015

Subramaniam, Arundhati. Indian English poet and presenter of cultural events; works with the National Council for Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai. Add:35, Sea Side, Versova, Andheri (W), Mumbai 400 061

Sudha Warier. Has Doctorate in Russian language; translates from Malayalam to English. Add: K-8, Saraswati Nilayalam, Jawahar Nagar, Kodiar – P.O., Trivandrum – 10.

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Corrigendum

In IL222, credit for the translation of the poem "You Are Leeladhar" by Santosh Maya Mohan, has been given wrongly to Sri P.R. Gupta. The translator of the poem is Ms Rajni Chhabra. The error is regretted.

Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

For almost a quarter of a year now, Sahitya Akademi has been celebrating its golden jubilee. Apart from the colourful inaugural ceremony, conferment of Fellowships and special golden jubilee awards, holding of multi-media programmes like literature-in-music, literature-on-stage etc., the Akademi has also organized a number of seminars, symposia, poets' meets and other such programmes in different parts of the country. From this issue onward, *Indian Literature* will reflect the output of these programmes in the form of seminar papers read, poems and stories presented and discourses held. One of the major programmes was the three-day *Kavyabharati* held at Mumbai where the Akademi brought together not less than sixty leading poets from eighteen different languages. Barring a couple of mood-setting speeches in the inaugural session and occasional comments by the chairpersons, it was an eight-session-long marathon poetry reading.

We heard the music of various Indian languages, meaning-wise many of which are as alien to us as Greek or Latin, but we got the content through the presentations of their English translations, the quality of which of course was uneven. A selection of these translations with editorial input, wherever necessary, is the mainstay of the current issue. One hopes that the readers will get a glimpse of how India's creative imagination is grappling with the Indian reality today, as many of these poems betray an acute social consciousness rather than the aesthetic abstractions or abstruse discourses on life and death or truth and beauty. There is anguish, indignation and crisis of faith, but there is hope and optimism too. Perhaps Anubhav Tulasi epitomizes it all in the following lines:

Give me that moment of dawn
heralded by chirping birds
Give me pride, the glow of assurance
Give me a grain of humanity
The heart keeps awake in the dire straits
Between bombs and frightful roars
I recite the name of love
like an auspicious chant
Each moment it stands
between me and my fear
It's the rising sun in a reassuring stance.

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The pessimism lies elsewhere though. The funeral procession of great Indian writers continues. This time it is Balamani Amma of Kerala and Kishori Charan Das of Orissa. Although both of them breathed their last at the ripe old age of 95 and 80 respectively, it doesn't come as any consolation to the lovers of literature.

In Balamani Amma we have a gifted poet who, without any formal education, rose to the highest prominence in Indian poetry winning all the awards in the country worth the name. To begin with, her poetry dealt mainly with the intimate world of women, her role as wife and mother, but at a later stage, she transcends the limits of the woman's world to deal squarely with the deeper questions of repentance and retribution, of quest and self-realisation, in some of her long, narrative poems on puranic characters like Parasurama and Vishwamitra. We publish in this issue a perceptive tribute to this "mother figure" of Malayalam literature by K. Satchidanandan along with a bunch of her poems and the text of a brief talk by her, on her own poetry.

Kishori Charan Das brought an introspective and reflective element to the Oriya short story after the sixties. His characters seek to go beyond the commonplaceness of everyday life based on habit, compromise and trivialities and engage themselves in a search for the ultimate meaning of life. When I, from the Akademi's Kolkata branch, brought out the Bengali translation of his Akademi award-winning story-collection *Thakur Ghara*, Kishoribabu, a disciplined writer and a meticulous person, took deep interest in it and interacted with us at every stage. Even a couple of months before his death he met me in Delhi to discuss the possible publication of Oriya women writers' stories in English translation which he had been editing those days. I am not sure if he could complete the work before the final journey. We bring for our readers one of his later stories significantly titled "The Last Story" along with a brief introductory note on him by Soudamini Bhuyan.

And then, it is in this issue that Sitakant Mahapatra, usually quiet and introspective and who normally does not clamour to be heard, decides that it is "time to say our few words", a la Saferis, "because tomorrow the soul sets sail." As a writer, he has been plagued by a self-doubt emanating from the dialectic between the soul and the *Samsar*, "between mystery and our Over-arching Cognitive Pride." As he further says, "I am aware that we live in an age which distrusts *mystery* and is never kind to any talk regarding the *soul*. But for me both are realities, perhaps more real than all the products of cognition and sense-perception. They are something for which and at whose call, a Beethoven, a Van Gogh, a Mandelstam and a Kabir have staked

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their lives." Having deeply engaged in poetic activity throughout his life, he finally feels that poetry's efficacy is almost nil and raises the disturbing question, "Have we ever known when a lyric stopped the carpet-bombing of Vietnam or a poem on moonrise stopped a tank at Tiananmen?" Perhaps it's time to pause and think on this question.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

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Anubhav Tulasi

The Prodigal

There they say the cow
disdains the grass in the backyard
of its owner's cottage
and there I left
Judas's kin
my dear native village long ago
in the prayer of sunflower rain
as the earth-worm writhes
out of its hole in the ground.

It was a festive night
with all the banners tranced in a dance
The drum casting a spell
in tune with the beat of the dancer's feet
The owl
hooting cheerfully
And the ghost of the turbaned old noble
came on a white charger
and carried away
my horn of plenty

It was in another city
I began strumpet life
made of snake's coils
where the day began
with colourful butterflies
impaled on the barbed wire
of trains' shrieks
Long-tailed kites

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on blue skies
The humped camel
among the thorny desert shrubs

The skeleton only
of the Pushpabhadra river

left
under the glare of the temple sun of Madurai
Yet the ape gamboled still
in the distance of the jacks
gave their friendly howl
The peacock spread her fan
the nightingale poured her sad melodies
which reverberated on the ageless rocks

across the river at Kanai-Barosi-Bowa
and their echoes have hunted me ever since

To solve the riddle
of ferrying across the stormy river
the tiger, the goat and the bundle of betel-leaves
so that none could prey on the others

Easy enough game for small crooks
but how to jump out the bed
as the sails go berserk
and leave under the pillow
blank paper, colour of dreams
with unwritten words gathered

My being
only a shaft of warm sunlight

that trickled down pink umbrellas
down a lovely woman's cheeks
A bank of clouds
like a bunch of juicy flying grapes
A whole grain
among heaps of empty husks

You gave me a pair of cuckoo's eggs

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to smuggle into crow's nest
I fed them to my master the serpent
and became his court favourite.

The Devil gave me a boon
"You will be a poet one day"
and further gave me
a sackful of poison
to mix with honeyed words
of a party flunkey
And I tumbled
off high peaks of carefree bliss

Crashed on dreamy rocks
to become a golden. beard,
on a grain of wheat in the field

One day that golden fuzz
grew wings

Beating my wings
a clumsy flier
I hit against the wall of notes
overturning it

And heard beyond the forest
unearthly music
Saw lakes of wild flowers
Flocks magic deer
and purling streamlets
alive with dragonflies
where the Devil fancied my shadow
and bestowed on me
an unvalued chain of smoke
and anointed me with molten tar.
The Devil showed me the charm
of hell-fire's flames from afar
and knave that I was
I defied my master's warning
to nestle close to that charm
only to burn
To cinders

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To return
a dead ember
to my old house
on a lonely tired evening
to the sombre beat
of the prayer-hall's drum.

Translated from Assamese by Hiren Gohain

Infernal Playground

May they awaken with light
on the teak sapling's leaf

Flameless darkness smoulders
and unbearable the moonlit night
when you lie on that couch of bliss
seven horses go galloping
across your dreams

Or is it the burning of the heart
the daybreak still far off
And preparation for the day's awakening
on the teak-leaf a phantom only

Is there no way out this hell
are we to rot here without protest
Then why kidnap the obstinate one
who would not surrender
or something even more
inconceivably cruel and monstrous

Does it entertain you
like a well-plotted dramatic moment
authored in North Block
Is hell your playground, sirs?
Then why do I suffer in page after page
in labour of anxiety and nightmare
to deliver that horror alone

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But it's tough to sit unmoved
in a posture of indifference
The gloom of the scenes
crucifies my conscience
Starts raging forest-fires
beyond the gnomes in the capital

I dip my pen in those flames
and revive the dying breath of the teak leaves

Translated from Assamese by Hiren Gohain

Anna Akhmatova

All over the place tall banyans
and Anna Akhmatova

An orphaned sky
comes down the stairway

You are deep enough
to drown in

When you go all alone to the garden
winter offers you fallen leaves

Widow, part-nun, part-whore
did you really have it your way

Anna, your joy lies buried
in the breast-deep snow
of Siberia

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

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Evening in the Village

Evening descends on the village
painting blue the warp and woof of clouds

Damsels coop in pigeons
with blue feed

In the temple-hall too
beats of the blue drum

Blue water spouts out
of the willed pond alone

Village belles lay bare their blue to the river
filling the jars with the evening
The blues plod back home

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

Fishes

The tree that is spiraling up
from which the yellow leaves do hang
upon the branches I slipped through my fingers
a few fishes

The shade of the tree is an umbrella unfolded
A cry raising spotted cascades splits the leaves
like the forked tongue of a snake

Men slough off under the tree,
gods disguise, Satan tempts with a rich curry flavour
and being bewitched I slipped through my fingers
a few fishes upon the branches

I thought of the river with swelling
torrents flowing beneath my pillow
though I did not delve deep

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and made a retreat from the threshold.
In the orchard there was a rush and
a scuffle, of what was stinking, rotting, reeking
It was smoldering smoke, endangered splinters of fire.

The masses on the threshold of warbles
The toothbrush of a twig lengthened into a bridge
A mound of lather crossing and re-crossing the bridge
fell in love with the leaves.

A deluge of roses drowned the rotting excreta
hands eager to kill gathered rust
The sharp edge shrank into a ball of metal
and inched out into a ring of gold.

On the lips, cheeks and chin and elsewhere
there was a carnival of light.
The sedge proudly dived under water and water
hang upon the bough like a beehive
and there I let slip my fishes

Wishing someone to take it at the hairy roots
the stony flame of the leaves
split like the forked tongue of the snake.

Translated from Assamese by Ananda Barmudoi

Clamouring Seeds : For Freedom

Pledged to devoting an evening for the muses
I found light from alien sources dazzle my eyes—
and my head started turning around
I saved myself this once from an imminent fall
leaning against the contoured dark,
which didn't help me really.

If it did help any one, it was the stone
where sacrifices are made,
in the times of hypocrisy.
And the vultures closing in

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and time, that always stays put.
Since you'd keep flying the banner
of heaped hatred and anger,
to free my land from the corrupting air,
murder me once again, if required.
A culture of stone and bricks
glued together by sand and cement
where inherited courtesies are banished as refugees
and drab darkness spreads at will
the germs of alien diseases
The entreaties of light flounder at the burning pyre
if required, to save the heart
from all the devouring emptiness,
murder me again, and again.

Give me that moment of dawn
heralded by chirping birds
Give me pride, the glow of assurance
Give me a grain of humanity
The heart keeps awake in the dire straits
Between bombs and frightful roars
I recite the name of love
like an auspicious chant
Each moment it stands
between me and my fear
It's the rising sun in a reassuring stance.

Reach out, reach out your hands to receive the clamouring seeds
brought to you against times' grain
Now I can honestly devote an evening to freedom
an evening of peace, a handful of fresh green verses
as you are not lying in wait
behind the vengeful bushes
As you've come out to the open
to the garden of child's smile
as you're calling me to the pond of colourful fishes
Light reveals itself in a banner of mango leaves
Peace settles on the rows of lamp-posts
Thorns join in the flower's song
The rippling verse of freedom
in gold inlaid with stones.

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

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Anju Makhija

An Order for a New Head

Small please, grey and white cells, pink too
(with bits and bytes).
Make the numbers even, enough odd ones.
Mould the skull with RDX plastique, the stick-fast variety.
Set the teeth firmly, rattling disturbs infants.
Keep the tonsils, I like to trap irritants for happy days.
One ear is plenty, bomb blasts are deafening in stereo.
Make the nostrils narrow, like a bone marrow;
air enough to live.

Now the main request: give me a third eye
(like the one on the truck).
A bright red light between two headlights
peering through the throat of a village road.

That's all.

Brandy, I and the third eye. In the moonlight...
coconut trees, omnipresent gods; two Gods too many.
Papayas, pulpy breasts; squeeze them dry.
Falling twigs, a shower of snakes;
swallowing them, I emerge Medusa!

Shedding my skin, I recoil in the armchair,
lost to the world.

Get the picture?
I'm Lao-Tzu smiling at Mona Lisa.

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A Farmer's Ghost

Behind the trunk of a mango tree you were seen
vigilantly guarding rice fields; later,

collecting dung, rounding up cows,
you munched dry *rotis*, beat your daughter-in-law.

A farmer never leaves his land, they said,
till rice is safe from man and beast.

When bins are full, rice mixed with dry *neem*,
he will leave. The old man is dead, not asleep.

That night, I read about witty Veetal,
Short-tempered Zhoting, man-eating Hadals

and other Konkan spirits in *The Times*. Next night:
ghostbusting, to dispel tales spreading like flames

in the night. Dark face, still as a scarecrow,
leaning against a haystack, you were seen

by all but me. Disconcerted then, now I see the point:
dispelling superstitions city folk like;

but, to believe the imagined to be true
can be a way of life, a fact, a truth.

Lightness of Being

Scuttling across the desk,
going about daily chores,
he spins a hammock on my typewriter keys.
Like married couples,
we ignore each other intuitively
Sometimes, face-to-face, we react:
Pressing capital 'D', I declare death penalty.
Cute or detestable—
all depends on life in the web.

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Escaping the onslaught,
he drops half-way down the cliff,
bounces back. An acrobat,
master of the game.

Spiders survive all odds:
flap them, they flee; chase them, they hide 'n seek.
Spraying, the only solution.
A whiff of poison. Amen.

Seconds later,
The corpse descends on my papers
as if mummified, fully intact.
Unyielding to the touch, crisp as a wafer,
it slides, glides, inspires an obituary:

of your industrious nature, the gossamer of your web,
much has been said. I'll remember you
for the lightness of body,
ready to float away, to call it a day.

The Train Vendor

"One rupees, one pin,
two rupees, two pin,
three rupees, three pin."

Little hands place
an oversized tray
on my lap.

"One rupees, one pin,
two rupees, two pin,
three rupees, three pin."

She smiles at me.
Black teeth jagged
like stones beneath the tracks.

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"One rupees, one pin,
two rupees, two pin,
Madam, five rupees, five pin?"

Five rupees for Glucose biscuits,
five rupees for police *hafta,*
five rupees for an Amitabh Bachchan film.

Angrezi Madam,
want pin?
Five rupees, six pin?"

Conveyor-belt efficiency:
she moves the oversized tray
to the next lap.

"*Ek rupaya, ek pin*
do rupaya, do pin,
teen rupaya, teen pin."

The Marooned*
(an Interview)

Did the water rise very quickly?
Sahib, it floods when God is angry
especially on full moon.
I went up the red tiles,
but fell down with the bricks.
Then I was running on water for miles...

Floating, you mean, like a piece of wood?
Running...no, floating on water,
not far from the temple, I stood.
Father, mother, sister had trouble,
they fell from the roof, the bricks
dropping on their heads, one by one.

---

* Dedicated to the young survivors of the '89 floods in Raigad District, Maharashtra.

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Buried alive! And now you are alone?
My friends Sajjan, Amjad are alive.
We live with grandmother.
Army jeeps came with clothes, food,
Medicines, a ready home.
Now everyone is smiling.

All for free! Lucky guys, aren't you?
I shop a long arrow in the sky
to stop the rain from falling.
God's well had a big hole:
more and more water fell
taking away cows, goats, rice sacks.

If there's another flood, what will you do?
Army people taught us to run,
no...float with wood and tyre tubes.
We know how to fight the floods,
to keep alive our mothers and fathers.

Phew, what an interview!
The rays are ripping my body,
I would love a cold beer, or
I could run with the water.
What a joke! The dam engineers
flushed the kids from their homes,
letting the water gush
in a sudden, devastating spout.
Damn it! Will Bombay editors
understand this insanity?
No. I'll bury facts, report half-truths,
Make-believe it was a natural calamity.

Another Marine Drive Morning

Two half legs,
splayed on concrete,
fast asleep.
The man in orange,
bearded face,

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hands joined,
kneels
beside the body,
eyes towards the sun.

Bowl-shaped hands,
wet with sweat,
head bent:
the beggar's pose.
The *dhoti*-clad trader
commissions
grains for pigeons;
his child dutifully
drops a coin in the sweat.

Blind by God's will,
made mute by man,
she witnesses
the office-goer's march.
The Mercedes glides:
a well-starched chauffeur
and the lady
disburse
rationed dal and rice.

The child, draped like a saree,
covers half her breasts;
a muslin cloth
conceals the rest.
Arab robes sway
to the snake-charmer's music,
leering at nipples
upraised against
the monsoon wetness.

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Badri Narayan

Now I Will Rear Doves

Now I will do nothing
except rear doves
sometimes in India
sometimes in Greece
sometimes in Rome,
Pakistan, Azarbaijan
I will rear doves.

From the Bay of Bengal
to the Arabian Sea
I will fill the skies with white doves
I want to rear doves even in *Trilok*.
In the cemetery where Hitler is still sleeping
I will rear doves even there.

Jesus, please help me
I want to rear doves
O bowls of hemlock
you have killed so many Socrateses
I will do nothing to you
I'll only rear doves inside you.

White, blue, red, purple
I'll rear doves of many hues
I'll tie anklets around their feet
around their necks I'll tie
threads of the colours of rainbows

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Now I'll neither write poetry
nor read political science
I'll wander from place to place
rearing doves
I'll neither make intricate embroidery
nor weave handkerchiefs
Listen, now I'll only rear doves.

Doves that spread sweetness in harsh voices
doves that carry messages of love
The very doves, the very doves
who tormented Alexander throughout his life
who will one day fly away with the hunter's net
I'll rear doves of the same breed
which could not be killed by many Nadirshahs and Aurungzebs together.

The doves who walk *runjhun runjhun* on the green grass of the earth
who will fly back to me
even if they are exiled to Andamans or Rangoon
Doves who will steal your heart
who will coo softly everywhere
Viva la doves,
May you be victorious doves
One dove, two doves, many many doves.

Now I'll do nothing
except rear doves.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

The Song of the Bazaar

Each one who comes to the Bazaar
will sell his wares for four paise
but will take back only two
the other two will be taken by the broker.

Whoever it is, you, me or Kabir
intellectual, writer or fakir

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each will sell for four paise
but will take back home only two.

Yes but persons who know the tricks
might get ten paise instead of two
But such people are few
as the shrewd merchants in the market
who see through their tricks
will gang up against them.

So folks this is a Bazaar
Meena Bazaar, Maya Bazaar
Altan Bazaar, Paltan Bazaar
Filled with sparkling goods all around
jingling merrily like the sound of gold coins.

Who's this, it seems to be Ghalib
Standing in the centre
scratching his beard
'There's neither a plate nor a bowl to sell in the house,
If I want to sell myself how much will I get?'
Niralaji can be heard asking someone.

This is my father, this is my *mama*
This is my *tau*
All are waiting to be sold in the bazaar
The crowds are thronging in the market
Gentlemen, the crowds are thronging in the market.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

It Happened not so Long Ago

It happened not so long ago
my granny narrated it to my mother
and my mother narrated it to me.

There was once a town
where a needle and a thread

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lived together for many years
but both used to quarrel with each other

The needle felt that it was better to be a thread
while the thread felt it was better to be a needle.
The needle felt that a knot could be tied beautifully with a thread
the thread felt Alas, if only I could enter the cloth before the needle.

One day the needle tried to become a thread
and the thread tried to become a needle.
But folks, both lost their meanings
and both became meaningless.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

Searching For

I am a little twig
searching for trees
I am a tree
searching for birds
I am that bird
which is searching for the half-eaten
bowl-shaped guava

I am also the guava
searching for the unending perennial seeds
I am a seed
searching for myself
In the deeply etched lines of a farmer
sifting grain.

I am that deeply etched hand
searching for the husks of grain
lying scattered in the fields
after the grains have been cut.
I am also that husk
searching for the scattered seeds of grain.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

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Mother's Lullaby

If you were the sun you would shine in the sky all day long.
If you were the moon then from Full Moon to New Moon
you would be slaughtered everyday by a butcher
If you were a star, my love
then you would be so far away from me.
Thank God you are only Badri Narayan.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

God Knows What Happened

God knows what happened
Yesterday a king shouted out in his sleep
Ministers, I want a place in folklore!

Worried were all the ministers
officials surprised
One who had police, innumerable soldiers
Water fort, Land fort
One who had sixtyfour citadels
Why did that king
need a place in folklore?

A conference was held
words, power, memories
myths, tales, Puranas
ancestors, priests
Om! Om! Ascetics and seers
All were invited
All heard and all fell into deep thought
How could a place be made for the king in folklore?
Come on, let's ask a magician to tell us how.
God knows from where
a conjuror was called
and he was apprised of the situation.
On hearing everything
he laughed,
imagine! Ha! Ha!

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Now the king also wants a place in folklore
and that too where the hero sits in them!
Suddenly he became serious
and then he asked
Have you talked to the poets?
No? Have you talked to the writers? No?
The old women of villages in whose eyes the sun sets everyday,
did you talk to them?
No?

You fools!
Then how will you
make a place for the king in folklore?
For this you will have to talk to
trees, birds and trails,
winds will have to be cajoled,
waters will have to be coaxed.
The seeds will have to be taken to a corner
and persuaded softly.

Alongside, the king will have to radically transmute
and if in spite of all this
nothing happens,
then the supreme action will be
that the king will have to die.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

Reading the Text of Wailing at Midnight

At midnight I would like to
read a text of wailing
which took place on the streets of a city against its grandeur.

Although I know very well
that all the memorials of wailing that were erected
were wiped away one by one,
if any letter remained anywhere by mistake
new methods were devised to give them a new meaning.

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One poet tried very hard
to analyse wailing
But he himself got converted into a wailing
A friend of mine who was a scientist,
tried to de-compose wailing to its last atom
but instead was transformed into that very atom.
And this occurred before my eyes
that a philosopher who gave a lecture on wailing
echoed throughout the world as a wail.

He used to say
the first word of creation was not 'Om' but a cry,
which then scattered into vowels and consonants.
While everyone watched he validated that
every cry is not necessarily accompanied by tears,
and it is not always true that Ah and Oh invariably emanate

There is a belief in the Shulva Sutra
that the mountain of Moonga that has crumbled
on the other side of the Vindhyas
actually did so because of the wailing of a dumb-mute.

In some places in the Puranas the wailing of deer is mentioned
on whose black skin the sacred fires were lit.
Centuries ago when a shooting star sprang up above Peshawar
it let out a wail after it was dissipated in the centre of the sky.
I want to read the texts of all such wailings
that have taken place in the earth and in the sky.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

Farewell

It difficult to decide
who was bidding farewell to whom
Both were very attractive and very modern
But one thing was traditional—
which was that both were crying.

Translated from Hindi by Mousumi Majumder

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Balachandran Chullikkad

Child's Painting

In a white paper,.
the child paints
in yellow and black.

eyes, nose, mouth, whiskers.
Claws and teeth, legs and paws.

A roar.
A whimper.
A little blood.

Somebody whistled.

The tiger returned
to the lines and colours.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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Dileep Jhaveri

From Poems on Poetry

Extinguishing a candle
someone
would ask the darkness waiting outside
'Come in, there is nothing to fear'
Poetry calls like that
'Come leaving your all
there is nothing to lose'
Poetry is not what is chanced upon
in search of some lost thing
Poetry is what even a lost one can have.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

Stone Play

There are plenty of stones
Ram! Now come to play.

The mirror, that is moon's friend, lies shattered,
scattered all over is debris of the ocean,
pippins are strewn in unploughed fields,
falling feathers flame the sky.

I want to hold onto something, to connect, to raise, to bind something, to let fly...

And while tossing just a few pebbles
torrents of sand, fire and lava come rushing.

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To buoy there are many stones.
Ram! Now come to play.

There are ashpiles, waters and red of blood,
with breaths awhirl on potter's wheel.
Clumpy dolls of clay have built castles of sand.

Now the stones are aplenty,
Ram! Do come and play.

From the sequence of Poems "KhanditKand" written after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

After the curse

Krishna, decide for once:
If
this war,this slaughter,this iniquity,this avarice,this valour, this futility,
this victory,this senselessness were already stockpiled like faggots
by you
then
from the spark of the sigh
of a woman–
like scorched, barren earth,
yearning after a single green leaf,
destitute
defenceless since ever,
destined to blindness—
when flames leaped
and smarted your palm
why did you not endure silently with magnanimity ?
Why like a kneejerk the viperish tongue hissed out with contempt
that the impending self-annihilation of your kinsmen
Was long presaged by you,
but the holocaust of Kurukshetra was Gandhari's sin?

Is it a sin for a woman to become a mother?

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Then why did you create a woman?

To have something soft, smooth, scented, succulent
to stroke,crush,lick,diddle,clasp,churn?
To find in the mirror of her eyes
a reflection of self larger than life—
with neck extended, plumage unfolded,
jaws tensed, teeth clenched, torso raised on taut toes?

To become a forest by stretching over her?
To peak in her palm?
To spread in her profound, palpitating crevices as spuming sea?
To have someone harken to your every word?

Then why do the echoes startle you, Krishna?

A woman is deigned to be a mother.
And a son is the echo of his father.
God's echo is man.
Whose echo is Duryodhan? Dhritarashtra's? Mine? Yours?

Krishna, make up your mind:
If
You have ordained everything
then Gandhari damning you is her right
granted to her only by you,
but worthless to her,
then of what avail is her sin to you?

And if in this drawing
delineated boldly by you
man merely has the right to add colour
then blending your blackness by brush
is anyone's right
mine also,
even if you may very well set afire with faggots this picture

From a large sequence "Vyasochchhvas" – poems around Mahabharat with the poet Vyas largely in the centre.

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

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K. Siva Reddy

Old Age

Old age is a fly in the *kuditi.*[1]
Old age is an insect in children's spider web.
When warmth flies away somewhere
the frozen body is a veil of tears that ebb and flow before the eyes,
Old age is a dead tree—sons, daughters,
relatives, neighbours, all a flow cutting me off.
On the other side shadows of hazy, misty drizzle in the blind moonlight.
The cot is the hellhole of old age.
The cot is the entire world of old age.
This is a well, this a bog of knives sliding deeper and deeper.
A wretched lonely desert with no boundaries.
A life of dreams of suicide
Of being insulted, brushed off, abhorred every second.
Paralysed useless limbs.
Ants clinging on to the immobile body.
Looked down by men, looked down by ants,
    looked down by flies.
When the body is dragged slowly from the bed and brought to the doorstep
the frontyard is the divine eye to the decrepit body.
Looked past my large-eye of the frontyard
A buffalo tied to an iron peg in the backyard
groaning and turning around the peg, in the urine, in the dung, in the mess—
A dung heap, next to the dung heap a gutter—a little further the toilet.
Bed, toilet, a clothesline hanging between
these two worlds—this "me" who died a long time ago.
Once the head is raised—a hazy piece seen from the frontyard—the sky.
"Who's there? Who's there?" No response.
A dumbness of man—more cruel than cruel

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more than the dumbness of animals, more than the dumbness of rocks.

In the state of having to gauge from the other's response
there are no responses, there won't be any responses.
Only demonic indifferent movements—
All around me only poisonous odours of mankind's treachery—
All around me only the stench of inflamed relationships—
All of you please pray
the moment sons become fathers their parents should die happily and suddenly.
Having children becomes a crime.
Having relationships becomes a crime.
Old age becomes a crime.
Living becomes a crime.
This old age—is a discarded, useless, rusted, corroded tin flung next to the wall

[1]Rice-washing used as cattle-feed.

Translated from Telugu by Alladi Uma & Sridhar

Metaphor

Inside all the fragments
there is an unbroken current of life;
A tender shoot, a new face—
man is a tree
he sprouts, though all his limbs
are hewn down,
he springs up from his roots
again and again.

All these years of progress
do not comprise things or adornments;
it is in the endless passion for life,
in the unquenchable flame,
unyielding, undefeated.
Man cannot be destroyed;
he's a thing of knowledge,
a primeval poem.

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A poem changes into a river,
the river into a sea, a bird
the sky, the earth.
Ripened, it becomes an ear of paddy,
or a tree bent with weight of fruit,
or the perfume crawling from bushes—
man's a marvellous metaphor.

Translated from Telugu by Desetti Kesava Rao

February is a Bird

February is a bird,
wounded, fallen on the bank
of a river,
and I took it into my hands
but couldn't understand
whether it was the bird or the river
that was wounded.

The bird, injured, turned into a river,
and the river, hurt, became a bird,
the river and the bird, wounded,
rested in my hands.

People were astonished;
how can a river become a bird,
and how will a bird change into a river?
And how are they injured?

In all paths of amazement
there's danger,
every measurable thing
is prone to harm.
It was not clear
whether it was the bird or the river
that was wounded,
hands were sand dunes
soaked in blood;

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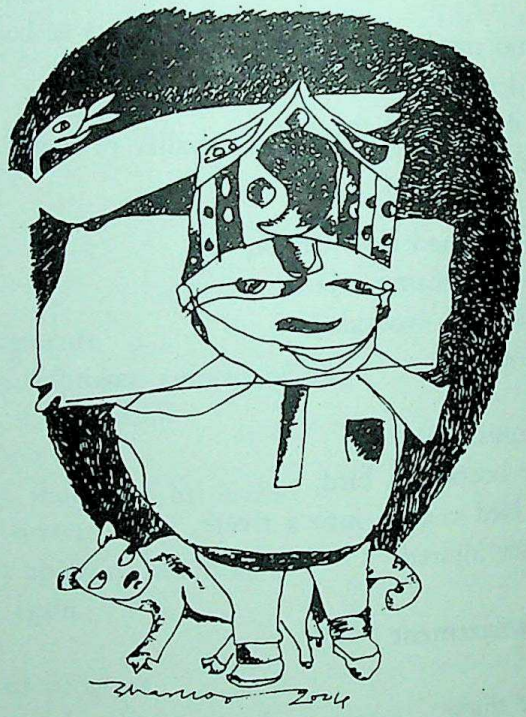
if now I touch anything
with these hands,
it will change into
a gory delight of blood.

Translated from Telugu by Desetti Kesava Rao



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K. Geeta

Computer Cohabitation

My dad with ten heads,
ten brains for each one, had
fetched me a groom in black
spilling all his brainy riches.

And we poured thousands
on a computer

My mom with a thousand mouths,
of course, too busy to be literate
never spared a word of news that
all the US software is in my hubby's hands!

On the 'first night' he said,
I'm his 'second' wife.
Lo! Before I could collect my wits,
he joked, 'computer' was his first!

Heavens won't fall—
I said to myself,
enough time I have
to set his computer right
after landing in the US of A.

Pickle bottles and all sealed safely
pat came he back from the States
as a loose lotus stem pricked from the pond
being 'fired'!

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Well, heavens won't fall—
we said to ourselves,
one can live Hi-Tech even in Cyberabad.

The car, dad's gift
always in office-parking,
going out all alone
to any function,
his address — email — ID
speaking to him, well — the chatting site!
Me? At the end, no ID of my own
Who? I buy jasmines myself, who else?
For whom? For my own pleasure! What else?

If he is wedded to the computer
so am I, cohabiting with it.

How long does the anesthesia of money last?
Half his salary goes to
tax free policies and some to
influencing people.

May be, hubby means—
one who visits a dream,
leaves before it's gone.

When he comes, the date changes.
No problem!
But if I touch him, then
says he—
not today, please!
Tomorrow, may be!!

Translated from Telugu by "MO"

The Launderer

He goes on with his
ironing–box of hunger
pressing wrinkles of life.

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Who wakes up first?
he, or the river bank?
Endlessly he strikes
at the wash-stone of life
With both hands.

On his bent back,
bundles of clothes bulge
He—a bilge bulla making the rounds.

The earth carrying mountains
becomes a ball, he with bundles
a hunch, a shrunk shank

No fame in his name,
his name is washerman
Whichever village he goes to
well-known as washerman.

Wanting in clothes? Why!
All the soiled clothes are his

Taking a break of
a day or two?
A pair of scissors
at his daily wages.

A moving washing machine he is
washing the dirty linen of the village.
Blunt hands rubbing on soap after soap—
pale skin peeling off, eaten by washing soda
iracund indigo washing out wasted life—
soaking knee deep in water day after day—
he flip flops the dry blankets by evening,
carries the tossed sandy life on shoulders.

Even a rugged rug twisted in winter
becomes in his hands a fabulously folded
white dove fuddled in his hands

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Dawn or dusk—
breathes in he
only the burning coals.
A little tepid water for
bath at night, his mind
counts the clothes by a
hundred at a rupee or two
for each one washed and pressed.
His shining towel
with a knot of small change
keeps on wiping the sweat
of a relentless weird labour

He goes on with his
ironing-box of hunger
softening the crushed folds of life.

Sprinkling under the red-hot iron
a few cold drops of water,
he drinks beads of sweat
increasing heat from cold
lifting the heavy iron press.

Translated from Telugu by "MO"

A Nestling Sans Nest

No eyes I have now—
only craters of tears.
No tone I have now -
only a hollow tune.
Heart, not in the least!
This pitiless face
threw a ten-year babe
into a hostel.
Currency notes flash
going gaga
'Better education'!
Label of discipline,

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punishment in real.
Hiding my own
three decade
maternal fond bond
I denied my sweet love
To my tender child.

Me, defeated in the crowd
I wish you'd be the only victor-
but a lonely victor!

Your little feet know no
path back home.
You unable to scale the home
walls of separation,
you with none to run forward to
to bind your waist
with loving longing hands.
A right hand broken
the hand dangling,
childhood's cool comfort
tucked behind an
uncertain future.
An only support
in the beginning of
the battle of life,
me, a mother
a soulless nest
behind the nestling.

No solace of a tender heart
touches my tearful cheeks
no soft hands of a tenderling
fondles me both as mother and father.

All this—
only to save the boy
a victim from the mad bad world
All this—
only to save the boy
an offering from the heartless family hearth.

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No more the dainty feeding
of loving morsels.
No more the fun and frolic
of both the mother and child.
My heart goes back
to my own childhood.
I drove you away
and now my heart melts and sinks
at that momentary harshness.
I didn't look back longingly
leaving you there in seriousness
My heart writhes and cries,
now that facade has gone
Attachment/guidance
Love/discipline
maintained alternately
only by one — the mother.

All this —
Only to save you
from the contemporary
cruel reality.

All this —
only to do my duty/justice
if I can't change your
fate!

Translated from Telugu by "MO"

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Kanaka Ha. Ma.

The Brocade Border

Tell me, how can a brocade sari without an embellished border be
comely?

Isn't it the border that carries, with the sussurance of pleats,
the imperious swathe of 'body' and pallu?

Flowers, creepers, mangoes, grape-clusters, temples, peacocks...
the body, a sea of dreams
the pallu, a night sky
And yet it is the quivering earth-edged border that takes the breath
away.

This simple bordered sari without body or pallu
like the artless mirth of a damsel unadorned.

Were she to turn around, it would be like a serpent-streak across the fence,
here one moment and gone the next.

Hint of foot, radiant flicker of toe beneath border,
her gait, a shimmer of mehendi.

Try as you might to unravel this sari –
game of dice darting between its folds –
it will not yield the secret of its infinitude.

Of course, brocades are necessary to enhance the allure
of lovely women.
And to pin down the vagrant stars and moon
a beguiling sari is all you need.
Yes, we must learn to resist its seductions
But here nonetheless is a tip:

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in today's world, civilized folk are advised to attach a 'matching fall' to safeguard their borders.

Translated by Arundhati Subramanyam

The curse

Came to bed
having washed hands, washed feet like usual
A tiny feather on the bed

Picked it up slowly
Hand is still wet, yet
soft! Cute!
Sat firmly on the tip of the finger
the feather of a baby sparrow
Placed it gently inside the book
closed it
Now the page is wet too.

It will not multiply anymore
like in childhood

Translated by Arundhati Subramanyam

Poem

She cat walks, noiseless.
Laps up some milk, on the sly.
Slumps on the threshold,
baring her body to
the white rod of a sunray.
Tongue licking her face
sleep in the corner of her eye
lazily, she stretches.
Try to catch her, you only
get to touch the tip of her bushy tail

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or sometimes, may be, an ear-lobe.
How she slips, catty cat.

Must catch her today,
hold her whole being and
put her on my lap and
caress her smooth skin and
put her to sleep.

Translted by Pratibha Nandakumar

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Mallika Sengupta

While teaching my son history

'History is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims'
The Holy Family, Karl Marx

While teaching my son history, I came to know
that the first human on earth was the Java Man,
the Cromagnon and the Neandearthal Man.
They were primitive men learning to survive violent climate
hunting wild bears with blunt stone weapons,
blowing bamboo holes they learnt to play flute.
This man-made civilization was created by them.
Possibly the shadows of women were there, possibly not.

All humans were called stone-age man then.
And then came the Iron Age Man with iron in his hand.
All primitive people were men,
Stone Age came on the ruins of Paleolithic Man
as we have learnt from history.
Forefathers were alone, so were the sons
neither did we have any foremothers, nor any forehumans
History, of course, is 'his story' of power and pelf
As there is no such reference to women in that history
we can understand
there were no women here.

Java Man was born of Java Man's womb
Neandearthal newborns were milked by Neandearthal Man's breasts

As the people of Java or Neandearthal were all men
man alone was both God and Goddess

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man was both father and mother
both tune and flute
both penis and vagina
as we have learnt from history.

What we have learnt actually is nothing but
the historian was really the eunuch.

The Carriers of Fire

India had no horses then. They came
Kicking up the dust of the Caucasus
Bearing on their backs the carries of fire—
Men from a terrible, handsome warrior clan.

Handsome men, but no such women came.
I'm the daughter of Indus, soil water and grass.
If they desire me, let anything transpire.
I'm a trampled star. Even warriors are men.

Seeing that the coppery sky on dark skin
looks so bright, the riders of horses put fire
in the womb; the warrior god Kartik was sired.

Not only brave warriors, the blood mingling in
my womb. They are my husband, children, brothers
from a dry land, become the offspring of rivers.

Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee and Carolyne Wright

Home

Get the bamboo poles ready before intercourse,
a home must be erected.
My son I'll carry on my back.
The Drishadbati River flows there still —
silt, new vegetation.

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Oh Unmoving Father—bless us so that this winter
we don't set out again as nomads.

Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee and Carolyne Wright

Robot

A satellite is eclipsing the earth.
A robot lies alone on its sickbed.
Its eyes are exactly human. Against its rib
a lighted button pulses on and off.

The robot lies alone under a blue sky.
It doesn't want a cure; it wants to be human.
Unreasonable society wants a robot-victory.
INSAT IB eclipses the earth.

The chief wants a satellite-cure.
The republic wants a society of robots.
The Way of the Robot will liberate the earth.
A gecko laughs from behind the canvas.

Being Indian, the robot will be born again,
emerging through the alleyways of the human womb.
Ten p.m.: the satellite is sighted.
Ten p.m.: the robot's pulse ceases.

Translated from Bengali by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Worshipping the Tree

No, I'll never sign a contract on your feet
I'll love you as an independent girl
The way love between the hunter and the woodland
happens, the way a penguin loves a glacier.

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No, you've never asked me to sign a contract.
I thank, bow to you, beloved tree.
Steadfast I worship you in love and fight,
forest and hunter joined in our blood's stream

Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee and Carolyne Wright

A Fish Whip in the Feudal Age

In my previous birth I was slave women's daughter
We had no room of our own, drew comfort from the hay
while next door lived the precious cattle
Mother disappeared in the middle of the night

Nobody knew where she went, why she wept at night
Nobody knew why I didn't have enough to eat!

At thirteen my master slung me across a wooden stick
in the middle of the marketplace,
prodded the fish with a whip, the cloth was removed
leaving the body bare, lifting the gill flap to check
the health and robustness.

I have no shame and am not supposed to feel fear
The fish that is a whip today lived in the river Kaljani.

Translated from Bengali by Malabika Sarkar

With Birds

One bird, two birds
in a room of concrete my bird-vine guard
alone all noon, alone all evening
I will drift; thinking
thinking; I will gesture like wanton girls
through the window,
thinking; I will punish with garrulity

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the man who will come home at ten o'clock at night
having conquered a kingdom
Hurling stones in the respectable .glass room
disordering this arranged life I will make him realise
that—Look, I too am human
I too am still young
I too like the jungle.

One bird, two birds
The hours that move by, swinging
weakens my killer instinct,
In the morning is the dismal work of college—I think;
I will leave
and go and stay in a Gujarati village for a month
In crystal flowers, red flowers, in a great sheet of
sun-filled sketches
as soon as I get up and dance in white sari
the trees will crowd in on every side
The gods will peep furtively and see in wonder
diamonds, hearts, spades, clubs.

One bird, two birds swing and rise and speak
look, your husband has come,
having conquered a kingdom.

Translated from Bengali by Marian Maddern and the Poet

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Nilmani Phookan

The Suspended Hour of Rose-berries

A posture of the hand
of sounds that least ever raise a ripple

Suspended from the snapped branches of the heart
O' opportune hour of rose-berries!

A sea-gull
soaring over cities ablaze

A finger slowly stiffening to numbness
A stream freezing up into ice

The dark Pagladia
Of red-hot lava
Flowing along eroding the bosom of the heart

A lengthy lyric
sunk neck-deep in the sea

Suspended from the snapped branches of the heart
O' opportune hour of rose-berries!

The free-flowing tune of the night
in the depths of the air's emptiness

O' ancient frigidity!
Of sounds that least ever raise a ripple

Translated from Assamese by Krishna Dulal Barua

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I Am Going Down the Hill

I am going down the hill
It's getting dark
At my heels
are some rocks
horizontal vertical round

And in close embrace are
gods apsaras
male and female Kinnars
men and women
all carved,
primordial nights.

A pomegranate plant comes up
an orange plant too
From the depths of silence
of thousands of years
emerge a pair of hands of my forefather

The cries of a flock of cotton teals
quiver on the leaves of waterweeds

It's getting dark
on the copper coin of my face
I am burning
on a red lotus
is gleaming a pearl.
I'm rock and man
I'm clay and man
As if standing at the centre
of a vast circle
I have observed
fire water air planets and stars

I am a horseman of the sun
Taking on thousand lives
I have accumulated
in my body every sun
of seas of woods of deserts

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in my rapt conciousness
every black sun of
every season

I am a naked man
ageless

With my whole body
I have felt
some rocks
hidden under water and earth
some rocks
and a planet made of
human flesh and blood;
My lips tongue
and innards have felt
some rocks
In the angular privacy
of my prolonged life
some rocks
horizontal vertical round:

Siva rock and man
Siva bull and rock
bull and man
the pulse of time

I am rock and man
I am a kiss
planted by men on a rock

Along the flight of stone slabs
the married women have gone up
the hill of rocks
the pristine wisdom of earth and dream

the lyrics of dreamy youth

The night has begun to fall
The moon has come up
Through the antlers

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of a barking deer
the voices of rocks
have gone up
spirally to the sky

Siva rock and man

Siva a burning tower of eternal fire

Into the body of Siva
Parvati has merged
crying

Now it is dawn
in the womb of the earth

Translated from Assamese by Niren Thakuri

The Dancing Earth

Two families we lived
under leaking roofs
of the same house
and years passed through them
with nights drenched in rain

And sometimes in dreams
a wagtail settled here a while

When you laughed, I
used to cry, and you
cried when I laughed,
exchanging each other

Changing
nights and days and sleep and wake
and old age parched with desire

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What dreams and nightmares
dreams of nightmares
dreams ever and after
What home and shelter here and abroad and dungeon
spacious plains
bamboo groves and wild woods
past and present

And the children only
alight evening's fire-flies
brushing away tears
and only the blossoming flower
search in its fragrance
for the soul's expanse

Where have I come where you have gone away
none know
There are rumours and Arjun's return
bringing what news of the dead child
Somewhere in some gallery
Nandala's Shiva
Consumes cosmic poison

We do not know
nobody knows
whose boat was wrecked off Kurua
by westerly winds
neighing like wild horses
in stampede
and yet will you not plant
plantain saplings
again in your backyard

in the waning day-light
and scent of godhuli-gopal in the air
grandfather sat brooding
what he found, and gave, and to whom,
cold fire of muskets in the old stone bridge
a fistful of mud and water
from the river Niranjana
a splotch of blood on the turf

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copper silver gold diamond bell-metal bronze
glass and nickel and lead

A rock-crap caught
in the river of his youth
the pearl of life in its eyes
crashed out of the net
on the night without a dawn

The world burns in poisoned flames
and the thunder of prayers
chanted from the four quarters

And we
What are we searching
offering whom
what thrill, what truth
what freedoms, what magic stone
open and veiled unfading
What sense and nonsense
from what treatise now
Blind the priest of blood-sacrifices
And crows and dogs infest
the deserted camp of the Vaishnava preceptor

Many things have now increased decreased
man's age man, man particular and universal
Man alienated and whole
concrete and abstract
brittle, hard, dialectical, stationary,
violent, cunning, treacherous
compassionate
solitary and sad

Many things rise and fall
accidents lethal weapons suicide depression
books abortion humanist
cancer agitation Baba comrade
uncertainty unrest
plan to change life

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Where is the end or where its beginning
beginning of what, where
who will take the measure
of what
whom shall we ask, what whom

Somewhere if I die waiting
in the darkness of some primeval cave
on a dying pyre

Somewhere if I lie
in the dissecting-ward of some hospital
on some loaded truck
naked in some rice-field

Somewhere if I wait
on some blind cross-roads
in the chorus of spring
at Chidambaram of Nataraj

Whom does one ask, and what, whom

Why does the rice-plant
sprout in the dark
Why does rain fall why
seeds grow in man's loins and
milk in woman's breasts

I wonder if
I have ever seen all the earth and
all the sky

All the faces of men
living and dead
did ever find one morning
myself in awakening lacerated face

Have I ever known
an orange
a rosewood tree

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Must I do
that which is unending
truth or love or Reality

Pomegranate flowers burning in tears
compassion in the holy grail of blood
and over the cemetery
harvest moon

Two families we thus lived
under leaking roofs
of the same house
and years passed through them
with nights drenched in rain

No do not tell me
we shall never arrive
No water in the river
No fire in the water

Hark

How she cries sometimes
in what desperate torment
in what indignation and ecstasy

The dancing earth.

Translated from Assamese by Hiren Gohain

Poetry Is For Those Who Wouldn't Read It

A poet had stated
poetry is for those who wouldn't read it
for the wounds in their hearts
for their fingers where thorns are embedded
for the anguish and the joy
of the living and the dead
for the outcry that trundles

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down the road day and night
for the desert sun
for the meaning of death
and the vacuity of living
for the dark stones cursed by ruins
for the red patch between the lusty lips of the maidens
for the yellow butterflies with wings spread on the barbed wires
for the insects, the snails and the moss
for the bird flying lonely down the afternoon sky
for the anxiety in fire and water
for the mothers of five hundred million sick and starving children
for the fear of the moon turning red as blood
for each stilled moment
for the world that keeps turning
for one kiss from you
that man of dust will become dust again,
for that old saying.

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

❑

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Prabal Kumar Basu

Evolution

All white cranes are young girls
The old covering their shame
perpetually ease out life
thinking of rebirth, walk along across the ridge
feeling conventionally dejected in a hollow melancholy

Veiled passion for touch is cautious
how easy it is for the white cranes to turn blind as it showers
the stars shatter whoever are on the immoral alley
the clever seekers await chances

Before harvest, why does the white crane, strive to cross the muddy waters
a little loving touch will effortlessly turn it to a stork

Translated from Bengali by Zinia Mitra

Desire

I rediscover it, if you were a tree, if you were the harvest yearned for,
I would have been also like a man, bailing out water from the soil
If you were a reality, a natural distant kin
I would have ignored everything else to desire a drop of water.

Translated from Bengali by Aparna Chakraborty

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The Words That Remain Within Me

The words that remain within me
Those words which are never given a voice
Those clouds that are thunder laden
without a drop of rain to pour

Those words pile over one another
Those clouds gather together
One day all on a sudden
Relationship grows to become a tree
with outstretched arms

A bond never breaks
The kinship gets lost some how

Translated from Bengali by N.G. Mukherjee

Mother Tongue

I have seen you from a distance
Never had the nerve
The words you speak,
how many of them do I identify?

The intentions become quite apparent
with suggestive language in play
The language that is of triumph
cannot find novel expressions

The words are not to blame
The language that does not convey
One who is without a vocabulary
knows nothing but the mother tongue

Translated from Bengali by N.G. Mukherjee

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The Birth Of God

Go for a re-birth, after many such births
Who knows when even you might become God?
Just for this I'm born everyday, then after the sun goes down
that birth begins to fade; who are those who gamble with birth?

Poets and even spies wait for such transient birth
Before God–life is born; at least one life has to be lead as a rascal.

Translated from Bengali by N.G. Mukherjee

Middle Class

When I have spoken
a lot remained untold
Why do you ask?

What I have seen
I missed out much more
Why do you ask?

Whatever I have written,
is miniscule to what I did not
Why do you ask?

What I comprehend is
way below what I did not
Why do you ask?

What I have given is much less
than what has not been given
Why do you ask?

What I have learnt
has left behind scores of lessons
Why do you ask?

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What I have built
I have wrecked much more
Do you still have faith in me?

Translated from Bengali by N.G. Mukherjee

Hari Ghosh Street

A wrecked relationship lies very close to Hari Ghosh Street
Rainwater-logged, slushy road,
And slimness ... like the waist of a model – are its attributes
Teenage girls treading this path have grown to become adults
Many a time we frequented it too – though unrecorded

Hari Ghosh Street surely underlies somewhere in every relationship,
Light and air – strangers here, suspicious pedestrians
Bookies and brokers and all secretive people, unnoticed, find it a haven
All conspiracies, apolitical, are hatched here

Nameless Hari Ghosh Street lies unnoticed in every relation
Many settle here, none knows the address
When marriage gets old, it becomes insignificant
whether love exists at all
It remains unexplored through everyone's life,
the not so known Hari Ghosh Street

Translated from Bengali by N.G. Mukherjee

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Pratibha Nandakumar

Being 1

Contemplating on the drawing board
deconstructing stresses and forms,
pursue the ever-slipping six packs
run away from seeking souls and grouping hands.
It's the time of redefining a square or demystifying
a rectangle, but of course not for directing a sun's course.
Light should come from designated gaps.
The inside out features and the outer median rejects
Constructions of other kinds. Cool colours take over.
Warm feels fill the space. Void is no empty air but
a distance not covered by the waiting footsteps.
Descending or ascending stairways lead to the
Same destination. You never know what reactions
your action can trigger. Sealed lips inflate.
Waiting is only a picture bought at auction, framed and
hung over the threshold. Pain is a friend, who picks up a fight
on solitary nights, merging the many different shades
into one big splash. Kissing away his wounds

I said build me a castle.
He put me in a plaster cast.

Being 2

I offer you this space to build,

or destroy, demolish, demark,
deconstruct, demystify, design, designate
or simply damn

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the curves, the planes, the depths, the uneven terrain
the many-coloured, multi-textured interior landscape.

You distrust
and hence you define the thin separating layers

and pick a shovel or an axe and
claim the flesh a means of determining
your decisiveness

and I defy you to disagree.

Being 3

Think about the elementary squares, columns
arches, flat roofs, ornamental extravaganza

and about the minimalist appropriateness

You have no opportunity to change the exterior
but the interior is all for your taking.
They said you are an expert in
restoration, renovation and

sometimes recreate
what can not be.

Being 4

Give me the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

You are sworn by whatever you believe in
and are not dismissed until judged.

Condemned to design a cemetery
you turn towards the living.
How would you build a tomb for
the Pharaoh and his queen when they are alive and kicking?
You look to the pet cat for signs and
the mouse is a dead give away.

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A trap is no trap if it does not trap the trespasser.
You wanted to dig a well and ended up digging a tunnel
which is no tunnel if it cannot get you out.

You knew it
And it led you here to me.

Swear by the hair with the scent of jasmine
and the pale lipstick mark on your collar.
Swear to acknowledge you have designs
on buildings and other things as well.

Being 5

And they award you for deconstruction!

Design theories desert you to tackle
the slopping roof reality without a column support of
decomposition. You wake up to a morning of
steel frames and blinding glass. Paint red,
whispers the colour goddess. You obey.
Plan from the pavement and reach the sanctum sanctorum.
Hidden well within the darkness of the soul
the smooth sand stones carve carnal appetite.
You talk of Neelanjane, the dancer who dies to
give someone Nirvana, lives again to kill an
otherwise exciting evening.

Forbidden to talk of love,
Physical, emotional, platonic, puritan,
I resort to the discussion of the redefining
of squares and rectangles

Deconstruction be dammed,
who says arousal has a definition?

Paradigm

Your fears are my own.

With each step, light gets displaced.

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Something travels in our interior landscape.
The external terrain shifts.
I quietly suggest burial of the past
Unaware that it is an echo of
the frightening questions and strange replies
confronted at regular intervals.
Frontiers vanish as suddenly as they appear.
Changing horizon misleads.
You drive through the forest
cutting between the dense undercover greenery.
Underneath the plain looks,
lie the fiery yearnings.

I invite you into my territory
promising no interrogations.
Pulsating virgin lands beg you for consideration.
I offer my loneliness, defying fury,
in exchange of a spectrum of colours.
Light, you say, can hack one to death
and pass me through a prism.
It was a decisive threshold into your
temple of light.

Held by the neck, bruised by the silks,
bandaged body is not much of an offering.
Life survives in my breast.
Overflowing rivers run amok in my veins.
When your arm reaches out to hammer
that one last nail,
I smile at you and open my thighs

and come in a shudder and create
that which can not be. They say
silence and worship go hand in hand.
I sing ardent Sufi songs to please
the Lord of deconstruction who
has no use for this paradigm.
Defining my lines and forms,
he simply designs a plug in the void
and I am content.

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Pravasini Mahakud

Beyond Name

Mother had, perhaps, called out,
at the stars—
'you come!'

And she came into the world
with a few wails
and a fine heart

out of mother's womb—
a naked girl.

What did she give Mother?
A day or a night more,
of labour pain?

By and by she grew
everywhere—
hair, face, lips, eyes,
breasts, vagina.

Then she kept, month by month
the seven-day vigil
ending in
the pungency of turmeric.

When desire came, face to face
she turned nameless.
Her hold slackened
on life, its paths.

Worry, awareness, impulse,
loving and leaving

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drowned as sobs
into the dark brown dusk of her body.

She reached for a piece
of rainbow
colours drained off it.

A place in a heart she sought.
Blood drenched her body.

One fine day
the body's substance
the body's essence
will be left here
on six logs of the pyre.

Hope and dream will burn.
The glass house of desire will crack.

The dark body will turn to dust
to become earth.

Like a white wisp
the pious soul will journey forth
to infinity—
to ancestors
long awaiting
her arrival.

Translated from Oriya by M. Vijayalakshmi with the Poet's assistance

The Girl and the Butterfly

My girl, what do you hold in your palm?
Mother asks,
eyes full of curiosity.

The girl's eyes, lips, body and face
fail to hide
that smile of mischief.

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I hold in my palm
a little blue-white butterfly,
look.

The closed fingers open.
There is no butterfly.

But it was there, Mother.
I brought it from the garden.

Mother let out a sigh
from the depths of her heart.
The old story of senseless loss,
defeat and surrender,
and in its wake, a sorrow,
too profound
was it, to be recounted.

I too had seen it, my child—
In the dream of those blue-white wings
sped an innocent girlhood
and a bridled youth—
For I had not
the courage to seek it.

Hold to it, my daughter
Tighten your fingers
Let it not desert you
like mine
that flew away years ago, leaving
an empty pair of eyes.

Wonder-struck
a daughter looks
at Mother.

Translated from Oriya by M. Vijayalakshmi, with the Poet's assistance

Aishvarya

She needed a star
She opened the window, one morning.

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The harsingar had rained
a clutch of stars.

She wanted a flower
She opened the door, one day.
Floating in the pond were lakhs
of blooming lotuses.

She wished to talk to a bird
Blue and white swarms, beyond number
flew
from ocean to ocean.

As she watched Time
she herself became past—
A banner
on the main news page

She wished to be a cloud, one day
The silk cotton tree, sal, Flame of the Forest
and gulmohar
had already lit around
numberless torches.

With concealed pain
shocking even the earth
she desired one day
to molt out of herself.

But—
Stars, lotuses, birds, time, banner
cloud and torches
enclosed
the earth around her.

She knew it, then—
She had turned into history
epitaph on a piece of rock
in the temple's
outer courtyard.

Translated from Oriya by M. Vijayalakshmi with the Poet's assistance

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Saratchand Thiyam

Communication

If you could speak at least, it would have been better.
Only because of your dumbness, you're suffering like this.

You've a very haughty manner.
You're the one I'm most angry with.

When spoken, you never respond.
When called, you never listen,
even when you've seen me, you never care to look.
When I move, you never follow me.

In that forest, you must be living,
who would believe that?

You're the one I called, isn't it?
What I heard .was my own voice, isn't it?
Amidst the hills,
in the forest,
I shouted, I called, I spoke
again and again, I beckoned
to you, dumb one
knowing fully well you won't answer me.

There must be something you want to speak about,
in your lips.
Overflowing must be what you want to express
in your heart.

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For how long, are you asking me to keep waiting
Me, accustomed to waiting all this while
with your words,
with your smiles?

The flight of white doves in the sky,
you never stop watching even for a moment, with your neck held up.

The hill, once very high, has become shorter.
The green hill has become barren.
The stream, flowing down, has turned muddy.
The images seen before me have become duller.

Who else would like to be "Echo"?

In the modern times, in the present day,
at this time, at this moment,
even the call,
even the reply
has manifested as you, only you,
it is you, only you.

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

The Pleasure of Death

To me, dead since birth,
you, who is feeding poison to kill me,
please, let me call you my Saviour, my God.

What's it to be alive?
How enjoyable is it?
Never got to know, however hard I try.
Live-as-a-living is what I earnestly long for.
But, forbidden 'cause I'm dead since birth.

Why am I, dead for such a long time,
desirous of staying alive?
Those in the world around me

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seeing them, the living ones
makes me ponder alone in my own mind
as though I too can become a being.

Speaking of death is better for me.
All those surviving around me
will die one day.
Worried are they
for the imminent death.
This anxiety
isn't there in me.
Fortunate for me, the one forsaken by everyone,
death, I've been able to receive it as my own.

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

For Those Killed

Seething with anger among themselves
gathering supporters side by side
remains standing in challenge
wages war
hates one another, extremely.

After killing one another, starts loving in the end
the wounded are caressed
delicacies are fed in the battlefields.

Cities painstakingly built over long periods of time, many centuries
are reduced to cinders within the blink of an eye
Gardens are made for those killed
flowers are showered on every anniversary.

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

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War

May be over
may not be over with you
The tolling of bell heard in the distance
trampling cruelly with your steps
roaring like a mad cyclone
rushes in, keeping to the forefront the intention of devastation.
Many an incoherent tale
forcibly opening with your utmost strength
from the deep layers beneath the ground
you wish to force-feed
by forcibly opening their jaws.

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

Itanagar

Every morning, leisurely
sleeping are the ones of your hill-paths,
the dusts;
when my bare feet,
wake them up, regularly
There may be some that are angry,
for
the little stone-grains sticking on my sole
start pricking.
But, I
don't mean to challenge,
nor jeer,
I only came
with the intention of seeing once
Donyi Polo[1].

---

1. *Donyi Polo*—the Sun and the Moon as worshipped by the people (Adi) of Arunachal

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From the *Nāmes*[1] built on the steep slopes of the hills
the children coming out,
Each with a *ginchi*[2], where are they heading,
is it forbidden to know?

The sleeping dusts,
will start waking up one after another
when the ones coming through the ranges of hills,
the bulldozers start running over them.
At that time, what'll you be?

With rows and rows of your bricks,
keeping them encircled
can you still save
the fragrant flowers?

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

Collage of blood

Boom
A bomb had burst loudly
everyone runs haywire
amidst the fragments.
On the cracked wall
pieces arc sticking
someone's hair
someone's eye
someone's arm
someone's buttock
someone's leg
all battled in blood
A beautiful collage of blood
A beautiful field of blood
A beautiful story of blood.

---

1. *Name*—dwellling house
2. *ginchi*—small conical bamboo basket carried on the back with straps

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Heard is a melodious voice
from the distant mosques
Allahu Akbar
La-ilaha Ilallah

Reverberating are the voices
from the sacred temple
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.

Reaching are the voices
from the tall churches
I have decided to follow Jesus
no turning back

Heard are the enchanting voices
from the distant monasteries
Buddham Sharanam Gachhami
Dharmam Sharanam Gachhami
Sanghanm Sharanam Gachhami

Translated from Manipuri by T. Bijoykumar Singh

Spring

Along the plum blossom-cluttered hill trail
On the meandering serpentine tracks
young mothers carry along
their babies placed inside their *shum*[1]
Casting stolen gazes on the lemon grass cluster,
the sun cranes out its neck
from behind the mountaintop.
The babies cry from inside the *shum,*
Their mothers suckle them
silently for a while
—With hope,

1. A kind of hand-woven cane basket, carried by harnessing it on the head with a strap

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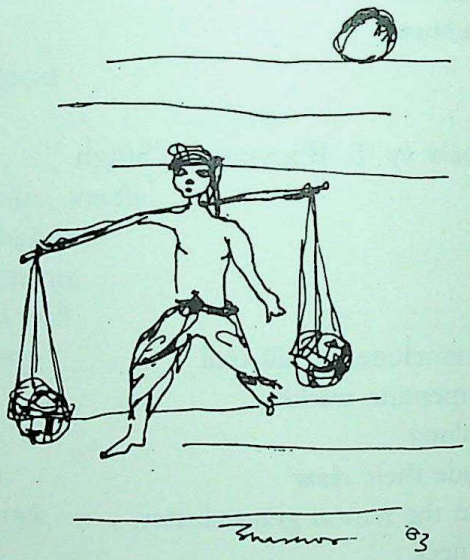
watching their children's tender faces.
On the steep mountain's facade
in the showering rays of the sun
the children sprint out
galloping out from their mothers' laps.
They prance around amidst the plum blossoms
like playful fawn,
contented, their mothers watch, leaning on their *shum*
their children's show
before the sun twirls down.

Translated from Manipuri by Chingkheinganba Thangjam



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Soorya Mishra

You Have To Go Back From The Banks Of The River

You're sitting on the banks,oh poet!
Your poems have fused all,
the lush of the river side,
the rice–filled prayers of the green fields,
the spell hung from the wide breasts of Nature,
the ethereal chatter of flocks,
the clatter of folks astride the river,
the white kites of smoke rising up from thatch and roofs,
the hide and seek of the gentle breeze and all,
the bright rays of sunrise and of crimson dusk on the sands—
all swelled your mirth
Often your poems were heard
through the cloister of reverie.

Where are they gone?
Your gratitude composed by
strings of longing of flesh and blood
The three eyes blinded by tears
for the sorrows of earth?
How could your convictions, your intentions
weakened over a few years?
Your will, your spirit shattered
through silent reconciliation.

Now look at the eerie shadows of
nightmares on the river-bed,
the green wealth is gone
the breeze has vanished.
Who tore apart

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and buried her heart
erecting mansions,
cashew plantation?
Watch the sighs rising up from chimneys
of factories on the banks,
pride celebrating itself with cries of bones.
Watch the long procession of the homeless
Carrying bundles of their belongings
On their shoulders.
And an ordinary crowd shouting a slogan—
Save River.
See, you are the arch-witness to this transformation
the protagonist of this sponsored play
the propagandist of this absurd race.

You are the unfortunate son of immortality,
the painter of a polluted future.

The face of your failure is facing you
at last on the little water left in the river
What vain profit are you speculating on
seated here as in the pomp of coronation
Claiming as being heir to a bygone glory
With a rusty sword, a laureate's pride.

You have to go back from here
These riverbanks
call the conference of defeats a day
to earn the might to face eternity
from the transience of a bubble
To tell everybody that
protesting is living
the alternative at the moment is to return.
Yes, you have to return from the banks
have to identify the wicked
once again to rear poetry anew
Yes, you have to go back from the banks of the river.

Translated from Oriya by Chittaranjan Mishra

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Against Erasure

There is no glory in
fighting for one's own life, it is said.
The fire that burns within
turns one's own self to ashes and not others.

Their story is the same
the story of Banita/ Rama/ Kumari/ Alhadini / Premashila / Draupadi
The story of their places
like Amalapali/Sinapali/Dhobei /Bhalumunda / Kurlabhata.
The dark corners, unnamed spots in the map.

Their dreams do not bring food.
They don't have lands for harvesting rice.
They own nothing—
fields, meads, shrubberies, patches of
plots for their huts
Their story ends as a flower plant.
Assurance, protest, tour, estimate,
mud–slinging and the hustling
are treasured inside the Milk-sea of democracy.

In a country of green vegetation
one does not get
a handful of soothing words
Life turns stale
without a grain inside
All desires fade away
drop by drop
The petals of living harden and twist
and the time of
final withering comes closer.

Be it tamarind leaves, be it kernels of mangoes
they find their stuff to satisfy hunger.
An earthen wall to lean against when tired,
a drop of solace on the tip of sagged breast
to silence the hungry babies
When this last drop of hope is denied
even the rainbow hides behind clouds

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No eyes can see them
Nobody knows
where and why the eyes turn blind.

The torsos of their unkempt dream
writhe in helplessness
These unique springs of blood
are annulled
and erased.

The names of these women
are entered
in the Book of the History of poverty
that posterity will never go through.
Under the wheels of the grand chariot called progress
they'll turn to a blood-stained patch of memory
that will vanish in the quicksand of our imagination.

They are neither subjects nor objects
neither human nor hunger incarnate
Rather a realization
a touchstone.
It's high time
our conscience were sharpened against the same.

Their portraits are to be exhibited henceforth
in the ivory towers of our minds
that need to be purged
of the spring-afflicted excesses.

Translated from Oriya by the Poet

Condolence Meeting

Dear friends!
Thank you for organizing the festival
of tears.

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One could almost see his beaming face
and hear his baritone voice
hammering on our poor souls,
his slogan-filled speech
ranting like the hot breath of a revolutionary.

He did nothing worthy during his entire life,
he didn't own a house nor money,
nor a healthy family,
not even a streak of power, nor vanity.

They all had built parties and broken away,
arranged chairs in the corridors of power
and emptied them, made money and squandered it.
But he'd have none of its lure
despite our repeated requests.

Instead, he remained hooked on to the youngsters
in the tea stalls and dreamt
of changing the whole world for the better.
At last he left us
without uttering even a lisp of a word,
leaving his four naked children
to fend for themselves.

May his soul rest in peace.
May God give his grieving family strength
to face the odds of life.

We'll have to take care of his children,
we'll rope in his eldest son
into our fold,
we'll prop him up to keep his father's name.

Let's get up.
There are five more meetings to attend.
Our sense of duty brought us here.
We could not do anything for him during his lifetime.
Now that he's gone
we could, at least, shed a drop of tear or two
for his departed soul on his death anniversary.

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Yes, friends!
See that the news of our meeting appears
In bold letter in all the morning papers.
For the world must know
Such a selfless man had once existed on the earth.

Translated from Oriya by Durga Prasad Panda

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Thangjam Ibopishak

Selling Bhagavan

One morning
a woman selling flowers came to my house
holding a flower basket.
She said,
"Buy some flowers, please
choose the ones you like;
I've brought flowers of every kind,
plucked them myself from the garden just now."
I said, "Flowers, I can do without
I don't want to look at flowers
I don't want to smell flowers, I'm allergic;
try selling them to somebody else, please."
The flower-seller said again,
"If elder brother doesn't want them
buy them for sister-in-law at least,
women like flowers very much."
I replied, "My wife doesn't;
she only wants money, gold too.
It's only that I can't afford it;
In fact, she nearly eloped with a goldsmith once
You can't replace gold with flowers."
The flower-woman left for another house.

Then another morning before meals
a man came selling bombs,
he was carrying a heavy gunnysack
filled with bombs of many types.
He asked, "Will you buy some bombs?

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I've mines that can be detonated with a remote control
or hand grenades of all sorts.
Mind you, none of them country-made
in fact, they're all foreign-made.
These days bombs can be put to many uses."
I answered, "I don't need bombs
I don't have enemies
there's none whom I want to kill
besides, I'm not one to go out and snatch money."
The bomb-seller said again:
"Even if you don't use them for killing
they could be bought for decorating your home.
If you keep some grenades neatly displayed
on a table of the drawing room or inside a showcase,
people will be frightened and they can be part of the décor besides."
I replied again:
"To intimidate people
and to be part of the décor as well
if a red brassiere of my wife
were laid out it will do;
it'll be more intimidating than a grenade."
"What's the size?" asked the bomb-seller, taken aback.
"Forty-eight," I answered.
The bomb-selling man left frustrated.

Another day
an idol-maker came
carrying many clay dolls
of different kinds and colours.
Said the idol-maker:
"Buy one idol, please
twin figures of Radha-Krishna
Rama-Sita, Hanuman, Gauranga
Bhagavan Buddha, Bhagavan Mahavir
Jesus Christ's idol, I have them all.
Please buy the one you want for worship."
I pleaded: "Let alone artificial idols
I don't even want real gods
I'm not one who worships gods
please sell them to some devotee instead."

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The idol-seller asked:
"Whose idol do you want then?"
I replied: "Osama bin Laden."

Translated from the Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom

Poem

Now in this land
one cannot speak aloud
one cannot think openly.
So poem
like a flower I sport with you.

Before my eyes, incident upon incident,
awesome, shivery
walking yet sleeping
eyes open and dreaming
standing but seeing nightmares.
In dreams in reality
only fearsome shivery instances
so around me–closing eyes
palms on ears
moulding the heart to a mere thing of clay
I write a poem about flowers.

Now in this land
one should only think of flowers
dream of flowers
for my small baby, my wife
for my job
to protect myself from harm.

Translated from Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom

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Wife's Shirt and Poem

Last night, ink was spattered
all over my wife's breasts. Why?
Couldn't afford a blouse, hence scrawled a poem.

So, Reader, my poem will make it to the market.

Translated from Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom

American Umbrella

We all own an umbrellas each
A thing that can be folded and can also be opened.
Shall we call it portable?
Because it can be carried in a much smaller size.
For Clinton it's not meant for shelter but smooching.

Translated from Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom

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Vinda Karandikar

Tremendous As Onkar, The Mountain

Tremendous as Onkar, the mountain;
it also prays with folded hands.
Under the wings of buxom clouds,
colours, red and riotous,
push their little beaks, and are quenched.
Near the foot, a lonely palm
stares with gaping eyes
at a caravan of coconut-trees on the sands of the creek;
it too wants to join the pilgrimage.
Today the birds are of the sky;
and the tender parrot-leaves of the mango-tree
quiver with desire to fly in the blue.
Today the prayer is as big as the soul,
the god as big as the temple,
and flowers as big as the god.

At a time like this, ten directions
can't suffice for the act of worship;
and the mind begins to flow in the eleventh.
Awareness doesn't
breathe in the past and breathe out the future.
To suck the milk of the Beyond
light, like a child, begins to crawl and cry;
things are not held by shapes, and overflow the edge of form.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

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Baki

When it itched, Baki scratched furiously;
she had not killed the lice in her hair
since Savitri's death.
She wanted to forget, yet remembered it all:
daughter Savitri, her swollen fingers,
flattened nose,
the weeping ulcer on the sacrum bone.
Krishnappa, of course, was as good as dead:
the little finger on his left hand had begun to fall off,
which scared away her customers.
She would no longer wait in her "cage,"
would come to the street (evading the police);
she could still make it,
and live courageously.

She traced her line to a certain keep of Siddi Johar
Still she desired to pay off that debt
of Sambhu—the grocer.
"No humanity, without integrity,"
she said to Krishnappa;
and cried with the abdominal pain of twenty years.
Now she had brought Sai Maharaj to the help of Shri Datta.
Burning her incense in front of his image,
at sunset, she said:
"How can I ask one Datta to shoulder all my sins,
just because he is good and willing?"
Baki's real name was Bakula,
(See: entry of birth in the municipal register).

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

A Virupika

In his youth he urinated
once
in an ocean.

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And the rest of his life
he spent, measuring
the consequent rise in water-level.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

The Traitor

Not even a handful of green grass will grow
if you pour
on a mound as big as the Himalayas
blood
as much as the Indian Ocean,
—a crank still swears by this,
and lives somewhere in a by-lane of Bombay.
He trembles with a nameless fear
and makes water
when he hears the street-dogs bark.
Call him coward rather than crank.
He gulps down his daily ration of liquid fire
served by the morning papers,
and then
to expiate the sin
fingers the love-locks of children;
reads the *Geeta* and warns himself,
"Don't you touch a weapon. Beware,"
opens his umbrella only to remember
the nuclear mushroom,
and places his hand on just anybody's shoulder
to regain his balance.
He cries like a neuter, effeminately,
when he hears the war songs in Khaki uniforms.
Call him traitor rather than neuter.
Chewing his nut of nemesis,
he raves though awake,
"How I would love to live, and see
Picasso's dove flying in the sky!"

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

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A Journey Through The Last Time

Dibyendu Palit

One doesn't visit such a godforsaken village so far away from Kolkata unless one is forced to ... and that too, to execute legal documents for partitioning ancestral property. Arijit wanted to forgo it all. He was born in Kolkata, has been tied up to the city irrevocably. Although their flat – purchased by his father – is in his mother's name, ultimately it would pass on to him. His elder brother Saibajit has become a Canadian citizen; although he comes home once in five years or so, he may not come at all when Ma is gone. His only sister, Chandreyee is in Mumbai; her husband is a government officer—his family accompanies him wherever he goes on transfer. Besides, they are well off. They would scarcely be interested in a few acres in the countryside. Two of his cousins live in the village. It made sense to hand over the property to them.

But Ma didn't agree. "You and your brother may not be interested," said she, "but a daughter too has an equal right over her father's property. Chandreyee would ever ask for her share, but I must see that she gets a fair deal. There's not only agricultural land in. Mansapur, our share should include at least six kathas of residential land and two rooms in the ancestral house. Before your father passed away, he invested a large sum for renovating the building—that too should be considered. Later, when we get a good price, we could sell our share and give the entire amount to your sister. That should suit you fine."

In the face of such an irrefutable argument Arijit could not say no. There is no such place as Mansapur on his map. He had to rack his brains to work out the route from the information given in his senior cousin Durgapada's letter. It was not a place where one could reach simply by rail. He had to take a night train to Parbatipur, board a bus when it was still dark, get off midway through, and take another bus to Mansapur. And then reached the house after asking for direction from several people. If he charted out the journey on graph paper, there would be four conjoined lines,

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and in the end, he would have seen that he had come back towards the starting point for quite a distance. If this wasn't hassle, what was? A thirty year-old-bachelor, as he recoups from the journey, he philosophises about his situation: had he been born in any other family in Kolkata, he would have been saved of the bother.

The return journey after two days. After listening to his travails during the onward journey, his cousin Durgapada swung the paunch above his dhoti and said, "You city folks might lose your way, that's why I kept it ample, although it was a longer route. There's also a shortcut: take a bus from here to Dolgobindapur, cross the river and then travel a short distance by bus to Bardhaman. Take a train. You'd reach Kolkata in six to seven hours instead of twelve. That was the usual route before the bridge was constructed. The local people travel like that even now. If you start early, you'll be home for an afternoon nap."

It was a long harangue, but Arijit did not dislike the idea. Sitting in Kolkata, he had imagined Mansapur to be a hopeless village, but in two days he has realized, it is far from that; broken macadam roads, slightly dim electric bulbs, tracts of paddy fields, cottages, and occasional concrete houses – with all these, this is a romantic place perched between a village and a small town. If he had the time, he could have stayed back and fallen in love with the place! But he had to return. In the end, he decided to take the shortcut as he wanted to see more of the countryside.

In the morning, Durgapada himself came to the bus stop to see him off. He explained to the driver where Arijit should be dropped. Then, after Arijit took a seat, said from outside the window, "We can partition the estate, but can we divide human beings? I am a whole human being and I'll live here. My brother too will be here. You are still unmarried, please do come whenever you find time. For a long time, we haven't seen kakima either. We were hurt when we didn't get an invitation for Sarba's wedding. Later, we came to know that he had married a white woman abroad. Well, we are happy if he is happy. One has to oil relationships, otherwise, they too become rusty."

When one puts on a kurta, the paunch above one's dhoti gets covered. The parting in the middle and the thin silver-rimmed glasses stand out as telltale signs of a village primary school headmaster. The road stretches long and straight ahead of them. After talking for a while at a stretch, Durgapada has been gazing absently in that direction. Last evening, as they sat on a mat under a starlit sky, he looked at the sky in the same absent manner. After

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some time, he says, "It's almost the month of Ashad, but there's no sign of rain. But of course, there is time."

Arijit recalls, in the haste before leaving, he forgot to touch his elder cousin's feet. He doesn't really care much for these things, but he wonders if he should get off the bus now.

He does not. Durgapada says, "I am told they are repairing the bund across the river at Dolgobindapur. If the bus doesn't go to the other side, walk across. There is hardly any water in the river at this time of the year; at the most six or seven inches. Don't be taken in by what the cart-pullers or three- wheeler drivers say. You have no luggage except that small bag."

Arijit has never been to such places. He hasn't even heard of a bund across a river. He understood only a part of what his cousin said. But he reckoned it wouldn't be much of a problem. After all, during the rains in Kolkata, he often wafts through knee-deep water to reach their condominium in Southern Avenue. The waters are choppy when it rains at a stretch.

Gradually, the bus is getting filled with men and women. Most of the passengers have no luggage—they may not be going to. After a while, a beggar boards and starts singing. He hiccups at the end of every line. A man in lungi and undershirt with two cockerels hanging from his hands walk towards the rear of the bus.

Durgapada continues to look preoccupied. After a while, he says, as if he has just remembered an important point, "The bus will stop at Phulbanshi for quite some time. The jelabis and singaras of Phulbansi are famous. Eat as much as you can."

Arijit smiles. Says he, "Barda, you shouldn't worry so much. I have crossed thirty."

"That is true, but you are still my younger brother!" Durgapada glances at his watch, "I must go. Have to open the school."

"Please do."

"Drop a postcard to say you have reached safety."

As Arijit cranes his neck to follow the receding figure of Durgapada, he notices an elderly man walking towards the bus carrying a bag and a small suitcase, along with a slender, fair woman with a lovely face. A part of her head is covered with the end of her sari and she has a baby in her arms. As they cross Durgapada, they stop and exchange a few words with him; then they waft towards the bus hurriedly.

The seat beside Arijit is still vacant. The one in front of him marked "Ladies" was empty for so long. Before the elderly man and the girl with

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the baby board the bus, a rustic old man takes the seat and starts chewing paan, looking out of the window. The girl and her escort look around, unsure of where to sit, but the paan-chewing man is unmoved. Then the conductor comes forward and tells him, "Let her sit here. Go to the last row, you'll find empty seats there." The man pulls a face and walks off. The young woman sits down, lets the end of the sari slip off her head and transfers the baby to her lap.

The elderly man looks straight at Arijit.

"Are you the nephew of the headmaster?"

"Not nephew, cousin-"

"Oh! I heard cousin's son. You are going to Kolkata, aren't you?"

"Yes sir."

The girl turns around and turns back after stealing a glance at Arijit.

"Your name?"

"Arijit."

The elderly person joins his hands together and says, "She is my daughter Kajol, with her son. They would get off at the Bardhaman bus station. My son-in-law should be there. You too are going there, please see if she needs any help...."

"Oh no, baba! Am I travelling for the first time?" the young woman protests, "Please get off. The bus will start any moment."

"I will. Please take care. Keep an eye on the suitcase."

The elderly man gets off.

The bus would possibly start now. The driver honks twice and then again, after waiting for a few moments. The conductor is at the entrance and is reeling out the destinations in a peculiar voice, 'Shibmandir, Gajitola, Sonajhuri, Phulbansi, Dolgobindapur, Mangalhat. The next bus is at nine o' dock....' He rings the bell even before he completes the announcement. Before the bus starts moving, the paan-chewing man comes forward hastily and slumps down in the seat beside Arijit. Then he says, "Please make room, I have to spit out the paan."

Strange! Arijit feels irritated. As he leans back, he decides, if a drop of paan juice falls on his shirt, he would catch the man by the scruff of his neck; he doesn't care that he is new to this place. And as he observes, the man spits out with the force and accuracy of a water cannon. Then he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and smiles a foxy smile at Arijit. Arijit looks out, without smiling back.

Although it is past seven-thirty, the sun is still soft. From the grey sky one cannot be sure if it is cloudy. But it would be fine if it continues like this, the ride would be comfortable. There was no breeze when the bus

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was at the stand; now, as it moves, a pleasant draft caresses Arijit. The road is not in a good shape; the bus has been jumping off potholes from time to time. The tarred portion of the road is narrow too. The bus has to go off to the mud track beside, to give way to trucks and buses coming from the opposite direction.

At the Shibmandir stop, a rustic young couple boards the bus. The girl has a big dab of vermilion powder on her forehead, her head is covered with the end of her sari. The young man wearing a new dhoti and singlet walks briskly towards the rear of the bus; the woman puts her bundle on the floor and sits down next to Kajol. The bus starts moving, but slows down within minutes. Perhaps the road is particularly bad here. The wheels throw up a cloud of dust.

Arijit became slightly absent-minded. Although he was looking out of the window, he was not seeing anything; neither was he thinking of anything in particular. He wanted to cover his nostrils and as he took out the handkerchief from his pocket, he noticed Kajol trying to pull down the window shutter with one hand. She tried, but could not reach the latch. Possibly, she wanted to shut the window to avoid the dust, but could not manage it with the baby in her lap. The young woman sitting next to her hardly noticed her difficulties. Arijit looks around with a sense of urgency and finds the conductor smoking a bidi happily, sitting in the last row.

These people are like that, unconcerned. Perhaps he should help. Therefore he says from behind, 'Shall I help?'

She turns around with an embarrassed smile and nods imperceptibly.

Arijit leans forward and tries to unlatch the shutter without moving from his seat. Although he could reach the latch, it was tight, he could not loosen it. The man sitting next to him was dozing. He shifted as Arijit stood up and moved out. Arijit stood in front of Kajol's seat and tried to pun down the pane. He managed to loosen it and it came down some distance, but got stuck again at the next wedge. What a nuisance!

Arijit asked Kajol to move back and pressed the shutter hard. It fell with a loud clang. The baby woke up with the noise and started crying loudly. "Sorry, I woke up the child."

"It was not your fault. He would have woken up anyway. There was so much dust!"

Arijit was going back to his own seat. Kajol, even as she tried to soothe the child, said to him, "Thanks, and one more request...."

Kajol has now been looking him in the eyes. And has been speaking

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in such a familiar voice that no one would think they are strangers. The baby too has stopped crying. He is now looking at Arijit with wide eyes.

"Tell me what I can do."

"There is a feeding bottle in a bag under the seat... will you please take it out? I can't even move from here."

Arijit bent down. The girl next to Kajol moved her feet and he saw the bag. He ferreted out the nursing bottle wrapped in a towel and handed it over to Kajol. He noticed, the baby started to flail his arms seeing the milk in the bottle.

"Thank you." Kajol put the bottle nipple into the mouth of the hungry child and said, "Baba wanted to send my brother along. I said no. I thought I would be able to manage these three or four hours. Now I see it isn't easy."

She looked at him after saying this and said, "Of course, it was you who had to bear the brunt!"

Arijit was looking at her parting. And the vermilion powder. He was not sure what to say, and in the end, said, "But you said you weren't travelling for the first time?"

"Oh! You heard that?"

The baby was in her left arm, the nursing bottle was in her right hand, she was looking intently at her child. Arijit thought he had seen the picture earlier. From the same posture, Kajol smiled and said, "I didn't think about this naughty fellow then!"

There was nothing more to say. Arijit returned to his seat.

The bus has been rolling, it has picked up speed. Looking out, he guessed, after a stretch of broken dusty road, the tyres are back on concrete. The sun is brighter now. He removed his glasses to wipe off dust. The baby was making a strange noise; Kajol's face was less than two feet away, she was swaying her head softly, in rhythm with the sound made by her child. In the meantime, the conductor had returned to his station at the door. From his watch, Arijit saw that fifty minutes have passed. Perhaps the bus was approaching another village. Just as he was thinking so, the conductor starts shouting, 'Gajitola! Gajitola!'

Since leaving Mansapur, this was the first place where they came across a small crowd and a few shops. Arijit was too preoccupied to notice who left and who came in, but he guessed the numbers were more or less same on both sides. After the bus started again, he noticed a grey-haired old woman sitting next to Kajol. The man beside him was still there and was dozing even now. The bus moved smoothly, the road must be good here. For the first time, Arijit felt the sun and the heat.

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He was feeling thirsty too. From the bag, he took out his water bottle and as he was about to pour it down into his throat, he thought, if he felt thirsty after travelling that distance, Kajol too might be. Although they hadn't talked for some time, he had been hearing the baby, and Kajol playing the rattle. She sat quietly; from behind, one could not make out if her eyes were open or closed. If he asked her something now, would it be intruding into her privacy?

He framed a question in his mind, felt a little uncertain, and decided not to ask it. Suddenly he realized, it was not only about water, he had been gripped by a desire: for quite some time now, he had been hoping she would turn around, look at him and talk. Although he looked out to take his mind away, in reality, it was a feminine face that he was thinking of. Why was he? Arijit gave in. Bending forward, he almost touched the back of the seat in front and said, "Like to drink a little water?"

Turning around, Kajol smiled.

"I too have a bottle, but I didn't want to trouble you again."

"There is no need to! Please take mine."

Before taking the bottle from him, Kajol made the baby stand up and lean on her shoulder, facing Arijit. Then she upturned the bottle into her mouth. The child observed Arijit intently, many sounds emanating from his throat. When he saw Arijit smiling, he returned the favour. Arijit's face seemed familiar to him. He went on making unintelligible sounds. It was clear that he was in a happy frame of mind after the nap and the feed. Chandreyee's son would be around two now. She and her son spent six months in Kolkata with her mother after the baby was born. Arijit often played with his nephew and developed a bond with the young fellow. This child reminds Arijit of him. A few days back, his sister has sent her son's photos, he looks very different now.

It happened then. When Arijit took the water bottle from Kajol with his left hand and pressed the baby's cheeks with his right, the kid found his spectacles within reach and grabbed them with his tiny hands.

"Oh, no!"

Arijit tried to retrieve the glasses from the determined hands of the child. An embarrassed Kajol joined him in the mission. Startled by the first physical contact with her, he was not sure if he should withdraw his hand or not. At that moment, the grip loosened and the spectacles almost fell down. Arijit caught them with alacrity.

"Is it broken?"

"No!"

'He's so naughty!'

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When she takes the child away and makes him lie down on her lap again, he protests. He wants to stand up.

"Oh! Stop crying. I'll scold you if you don't."

"Let him stand up!" Arijit says, "It is such a boring journey! He too has to do something."

"Do you find the journey boring?"

Arijit didn't talk about himself. He is not sure why Kajol dragged him into it. She makes the child stand up like earlier and says, "What if the glasses had broken?"

"Nothing much. I wouldn't have become blind."

"But you would have remembered."

She turns away.

The baby has started playing again. His target is Arijit, or perhaps, his spectacles. He thrust himself forward to catch hold of something, now using both hands; and he keeps on making unintelligible sounds. Arijit enjoys the game. Taking off his glasses, he holds them tantalisingly close, but just beyond the baby's reach, and notices excitement in his opponent's expression. Not only his hands, his eyes too are alert now. He is so excited that saliva drips down the comer of his mouth.

The bus goes past Sonajhuri too.

The man sitting next to him was dozing all this while. He wakes up and stretches himself. Then, looking at them, says, "So, the young man is more fond of his father, isn't he?"

It was not expected. Arijit notices, Kajol turns around suddenly to look at the man and then at him. As their eyes meet, a shadow crosses her face; without looking at him even for a fraction of a second, she turns away. Before he thinks of Kajol's embarrassment, Arijit realizes, he too is embarrassed. He speaks with irritation, "I am not his father."

The man puts on a puzzled look and says, "Oh! Not his father! Then—" Then what? The man does not say it. The child continues his efforts to attract attention in his very special language.

Arijit no longer responds to him. He looks out, yanking himself away from the relationships of the moment. The scene before his eyes keeps changing, he feels the heat of the late morning air on his face. But the discomfort within him is worse. He wishes Kajol hadn't heard the nosey man. He does not know how a married woman reacts in a situation like this particularly if that woman is like her, who is open and clear, and who, although boarded the bus at a village, hardly behaves like an ordinary village girl. On the contrary, she is smart. Would she talk spontaneously from now on? If they hadn't interacted in a light-hearted manner on the way, this

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embarrassment could have been avoided. It was Arijit who pulled down the shutter, perhaps he would have done the same thing for any other woman. But possibly, her father's words, "please see if she needs any help...," made him fell responsible. But in the end, he cannot justify why he should feel so embarrassed.

He was lost in thoughts. He comes back to reality when the conductor starts yelling: 'Phulbanshi! Phulbanshi! The bus will stop before Satkodi Sweet Shop. You'll get hot singaras and jelabis here. And tea. There are separate bathrooms for ladies and gents behind the shop. You can leave your goods in the bus. Bus stops for ten minutes. The bridge is being repaired. Bus will not go after Dolgobindapur. You'll get Tempos for Mangalhat. And push carts...'

The man delivers the long speech in an unbroken monotone, somewhat like tourist guides in cities. He surely has some arrangement with Satkodi Sweet Shop. The rest of the information is old hat. Durgapada apprised him of all those points at the Mansapur bus stop. Arijit decides he would think about how to cross the river after the bus reached Dolgobindapur. Kajol too would have to cross; did he have any responsibility towards her?

At Phulbanshi, most of the passengers got off. The few men scattered in the rear of the bus seemed – at the first glance – to be travelling to the end of the universe. They had such deadpan faces! The man sitting next to him too had got off. As Arijit left his seat, he saw Kajol sitting impassively, with the baby sleeping in her lap. When did he fall asleep?

Arijit felt a little dejected. As far as he could remember, when he looked out of the window, the baby was talking to him busily. When did he return to his mother's lap?

After slight hesitation, Arijit asked, "Won't you get down?"

"No, rather..."

"I heard you get great singaras and jelabis here?"

Kajol smiled, perhaps a little cautiously. She asked, "Don't you get them in Kolkata?"

Was she being sarcastic? Her words sounded a little out of tune. Without giving himself away, Arijit said, "You look serious, what's wrong?"

Kajol did not respond. Looking down, she passed her hand lightly over the child's brow. "The baby opened his eyes with the touch. For some time he looked blankly at Arijit and then let off a "Haw!"

Kajol pressed a finger on her lips and looked at the child. Then she said, "Why did you correct that man? An unknown person, God knows what he thought."

A surprised Arijit did not know what to say. He felt Kajol had actually wanted to say something else, but changed her mind at the last moment.

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Did she suddenly recall that they did not even know each other? She was now looking at the shop absently. It did not seem it was she who spoke those words a few moments ago.

Arijit thought there was no need to respond, and moved on to another topic.

"I am going down for a cup of tea. Would you come?"

Kajol nodded. Then said, "I have to change his nappy. Please go ahead." She did not take long to change the baby's diaper; after a few seconds she came and stood at the door. She held the child with one arm and the slipping end of her sari near her bosom with her free hand.

"Shall I take him?"

"See if he goes to you?"

Taking off his glasses, Arijit kept them in his trousers pocket. And then, when he stretched his arms, the child came to him without hesitation. He passed a hand over Arijit's face and was surprised not to find the spectacles. He looked at Arijit's face with wonder and it appeared he was making an effort to recognise him.

Arijit rested him on his shoulder and heard him laughing energetically. He clutched Arijit's hair with both hands.

Kajol was straightening her sari. Arijit said to her, "He's, fond of people, came to me without hesitation."

"I am surprised too. Normally, he doesn't care much for anyone except close family members. Who knows, after a pause, she added in a voice that sounded a little different, "perhaps you were someone close to him in his previous birth."

Saying nothing, he lifted the child with both arms.

Kajol stood in the middle of the road, a little away from him. Her head wasn't covered and no one would miss the vermilion powder on her parting. A feint smile flickered on her lips. She said from where she stood,

"Please hold him, let me get some tea. I too would like to have a tea now."

"But let me..."

"It costs only two rupees, I'll pay. Shall I bring some singaras and jelabis?"

The last part was said in jest; Arijit said, "Only if you feel like it. I've had a heavy breakfast."

There are only a few passengers for Dolgobindapur. The bus has picked up speed. Since they left Phulbanshi, Kajol hasn't talked. The baby too is quiet, perhaps sleeping. There is no one next to Kajol, and the seat beside Arijit is vacant too. The way she spoke at Phulbanshi, it seemed she would break the barriers of unknowing and become free with him. For

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a moment he had even imagined they would sit side by side for the rest of the journey. It didn't happen. When Kajol boarded the bus and he gave the slightly tired child back to her, she took him without a word. Arijit looked at the vacant space beside her through the comer of his eyes and returned to his seat. He has no idea if she noticed him, or of what made her so preoccupied at the moment. He too became engrossed in thoughts as he looked out of the window. He wondered if he had expected anything. Or if Kajol did. When two persons do not know each other at all, there can be nothing between them except distance.

Through small hamlets and gaps among trees, a distant river has been coming nearer. The riverbed is mostly dry. A narrow channel of water gleams in sunlight. It is difficult to guess the depth from this distance. After going a little closer, Arijit saw some big and small boats stuck on the banks and reckoned, had the river been deep, there would have been at least a few boats on the water. As the bus turned towards left, he lost the river.

Dolgobindapur. The child is in Kajol's arms—he has once again woken up from slumber. Arijit moved forward and picked up her suitcase. It was pretty light. He wondered how she could carry the suitcase with the baby in one arm and the bag in the other! Perhaps she would have engaged a porter.

The jetty is quite crowded. The bund that served as a bridge between the two sides in dry seasons has subsided in the middle. From the bus stand, they saw the long queue of passengers waiting for three wheeled (mini-trucks to take them across. One such vehicle could be seen going across, more than fully laden with goods and humans. From the other side, two pushcarts carrying vegetables and passengers were coming towards this side. Among the passengers were two goats. Arijit carefully observed the legs of the men pushing the carts. The water was much below their knees. Then he noticed with some relief some men and women of various ages walking across the river, carrying bundles on their heads and babies on their shoulders. An old man with a stick was wading through water leaning on a youth. When the pushcarts reached this side, a number of people broke away from the queue and ran to get onto the carts.

It was Kajol who spoke first.

"Shall we stand here?"

"No," Arijit replied, "but how will you cross the river?"

She looked sombre. Her gaze was fixed at the chaos in front of them. Shifting the baby to the other shoulder, she said, "I never expected the situation would be so bad today. There are very few Tempos and pushcarts. How long can we stand in the queue in this hot sun?"

The baby was looking at the water. Seeing the goats coming off the pushcarts, he called "Haw! Haw!"

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"There is another way."

"Like?"

Kajol was looking at him, after a long time. Arijit said, "Getting down in the water."

Observing the water, she said, "You travel this way often?"

"Often?" Arijit says with a smile. "This is the first time, and possibly the last. The headmaster of your school asked me to walk across the water."

Kajol looks up. She picks up the middle and says, "Why is this the last time?"

It is not easy to answer the question, Arijit says nothing.

Kajol looks a touch helpless. Stealing a quick glance at Arijit, she looks at the river and says, "If I didn't have the suitcase and the baby, I too would have walked across. I have gone so many times."

"Is that your problem?"

"Isn't that a problem? Perhaps a porter..."

"Forget it." Suddenly, Arijit puts down the travel bag from his shoulder and says. Take off your slippers and put them in. There's no point in wasting time."

Saying this, he bent down to unlace his shoes. Taking out some old newspaper from his bag, he wrapped the shoes and put them in the bag. Then he said, "What are you waiting for?"

"It is not so easy. The river bed is often slippery with moss. If I fell down and something happened to the child?"

"Since he came to my arms once, hopefully, he wouldn't mind the second time!" He stretched his arms for the baby and said, "Come! Come!" Almost instantaneously, the baby was ready to jump into his arms; Kajol; moved back and said, "Surprising! At least, take off the glasses."

Arijit kept the glasses in his hip pocket and after rolling up his trousers to the knees, took the child. Said he, "Why are you surprised? Didn't you yourself say, we have a relationship dating back to the previous life?"

Kajol blushed, said nothing.

Arijit was much more spontaneous. Said, "Please take off the slippers and put them in my bag. I'll carry it. Please give me your bag too. Can you carry the suitcase?"

She nodded. Then she followed him without saying anything more. They walked into the water. The baby was clutching his hair firmly. He seemed delighted and he spoke in his own language to express his happiness. The water was transparent there. Not only his own feet, he could see two other slender feet bordered with alta. After some distance, he asked, "Hope you don't find the suitcase heavy? I can take it."

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"I know," she said in a voice that sounded different, 'which is the next burden you would wish to carry?"

Even as she says this, she comes dose to him, very dose. She clutches his elbow with her right hand and says, 'Why did you take the same bus?' He does not reply. He only slows down slightly and notices, they have reached the middle of the water. Kajol's touch tells him, time is running out. The distance does not increase, it becomes shorter.

Translated from Bengali by Santanu Sinha Chaudhuri

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The Honey-Sweet Jack Tree

Narayan

Don't the jack leaves cry when they fall? Ayyappan, standing in the courtyard, watched the jack tree intently. The honey-sweet jack tree of wide-spread branches has been giving shelter and breeze to the house and its precincts like a guardian. And now the bamboo ladder is leaning against its straight, tall and sturdy trunk. On the small branches there were fresh jackfruits, which hadn't yet ripened.

Along with his son Surendran, two people were measuring its girth. As he stood wondering why they were doing so, Surendran's wife Leela appeared with a pitcher of water. She gave a searching look and asked: "Do you have timber-dealers with you, Father?" Oh, Ayyappan was shocked.

He stared at Leela.

"Didn't you tell him not to sell it?"

"Oh, who listens to what I say?'

"Hm.. .maybe, to settle the accounts at the liquor shop."

Surendran's two sons stepped into the yard.

"Please don't sell the jack tree, grandpa," they pleaded.

"Tell your father, dears."

With a burning mind, Ayyappan looked at the tree again. What a variety of birds had perched on its branches! Earlier it used to be a flock of birds. Now there would be just two or three of them.

The timber of the jack was in great demand. But no one in the house had ever thought of selling this possession of theirs. And now this son .... The children of the family never had a taste of poverty thanks to this tree.

In the month of Thulam (October-November) the tree would be filled from top to bottom with nascent fruits, two or three hanging from each node. Some of them would fall off and the others would half-ripen in the cold month of Makaram (January-February). It was in Makaram that the second generation of flowers blossom on the trunk and on the branches.

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During Shivaratri in Kumbham (February-March), it was customary to fast and forego sleep. On that day there was no rice or curry. There was one meal without rice. On the jack there would be a fruit ripe enough for stewing. In the morning after a bath and after smearing his forehead with ashes, Ayyappan would reach the foot of the jack tree. The fruit for the day had been chosen beforehand. Yet another glance was sent up, for one fruit was becoming less. The blackness of the stalk of the fruit was proof of its ripeness. As if to take its permission, there would be a moment's silent prayer. "All these are for you. Cut out what you want." On the assumption that the tree had said thus, he would mount a ladder and tie a rope round the fruit to bring it down, if it happened to be at the top. If it were lower down, he would cut its stalk close to the fruit.

From the wounds of the stalk that had not fallen off the trunk, sap would ooze for two days. It would be collected in a cupped jack leaf. In his youth Ayyappan used to do that. Now he is a grandfather.

Ayyappan, whose limbs and eyes have been affected by age, remembers the honey-sweet jack all too well. Those days of prosperity began in the month of Kumbham and lasted till the beginning of Mithunam (June-July). During that phase there was a yield of a hundred to hundred and fifty ripe and unripe fruits.

The jackfruit for breakfast and for stewing in the evening would be cut into pieces, the kernels scooped out. After removing the fibre, the kernels would be slit open on one side without breaking entirely the fleshy fruit part covering it and the seeds taken out. The kernel would then be cut fine into long flakes and cooked, adding to it a finely pounded mixture scraped coconut, curry leaves, turmeric, chillies and salt in required measure. This was called chackapuzhukku. If gently pressed, the outer skin of the seeds would break and come off. Removing the hard skin and cutting the seeds into small, slender pieces, thoran could be made. If the seeds were chopped fine, they could be fried in oil. With drumstick or prawns or mango and such added to it, curries with gravy could be made.

In the months of Meenam (March-April) and Medam (April-May) jackfruits ripened in large numbers. If one was not careful, they might all become over-ripe and rotten. So the ripe ones would be brought down as and when they ripen. They would be cut, the kernels taken out and sliced into four pieces each, seasoned in boiling water and sun-dried, and then stored, for preparing puzhukku, during the lean months. The leftover could be used to feed the domestic animals.

If a jackfruit happened to ripen and hang on a branch where one could not climb or a bamboo pole with a knife patched on to it to cut the stalk could not reach, squirrels, bats, crows and other birds would gather

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around it. They would eat the soft-fruit kernels and drop the seeds... to sprout in the soil and propagate the species. But selfish humans wouldn't let it happen. They would pick them up one by one. Man is never content with gorging.

If good seeds were in plenty, they would be rinsed and dried in the sun. To preserve them, in a comer by the kitchen corridor, dry sand would be spread in a square pit made of brick and sand. Over that the seeds and above them sand or dry soil would be spread. Sometimes the pit would be full. The months of Mithunam and Karkitakam, marked by rain and cold and penury for company, would not move forward even when pushed. One could stay swathed in warm clothes. In homes where there were children, poverty would keep company. Thereafter things were difficult—tiny bellies that were burning and twisting, would be droning like wasps. Times when there was not even a wild herb. No headache for the housewife who had stored seeds and cassava. After supper she would soak in separate vessels the necessary seeds and cassava in water for the next day's breakfast. In the morning the soaked cassava would be washed clean and the seeds scraped and slit for mixed puzhukku. To go with it there would be curry or chutney or fish roasted. Children liked something different from puzhukku or curry. They wanted the preserved seeds roasted in a broken pot or skillet. When done, these would be spread on a winnowing sieve and rubbed with coconut shells to remove the coat. Now they were ready for munching. If one had coconut kernel too, the delight would be great. The seeds could also be cast into the hot ash in the earthen stove to be roasted. But if one stayed indoors fearing going out in the rains, the neighbourhood would know of it hearing the loud cracking noises the seeds made, bursting open.

At duskfall Ayyappan leaned against the jack tree. There was a slightly hot eddy of wind, like someone's sigh. For long could it go on like this? Wasn't someone, concealed behind the jack tree, asking this question? If one stood on the other side of the trunk, it was impossible to see him. Ayyappan remembered it and muttered, "O jack tree, your own heavy timber is your undoing. If only you were thin and famished!" But, doesn't even Ayyappan know this? Whatever the soil offers, the trees accept. "Wasn't it your grandfather who built a house close to me? He too looked around for men to fell me. If my fruits were tasteless, I would have been made stuff for fire. From your great grandfather downwards everyone ate my fruit. In my shade everyone ran around and played. Did you try to sell me then? Why didn't you do it? Your son will certainly do it."

"No, no, he is my son. I will not allow it."

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"Will a son listen to an old father?"

"Won't he?"

Once again a breeze like a sigh. Yellow shreds were flying about in all directions. Wasn't it an axe making its way into the sturdy timber? The sap from the cuts was the colour of blood. The branches of the tree were trembling with pain. O jack tree, you are one among the celestial trees. For what sin are you being felled?

"For generations I had warded off a family's hunger, provided shade, maintained water-reserves, and kept the surrounding soil fertile. Are not these acts crimes according to the new law? Your son thinks that the jack tree is an impediment to the growth of rubber. He obtained money for selling me."

"If only a branch had broken off and dropped on the head of that wretch...and killed him!" Isn't it so? What a pity! You don't even know that trees bear no malice? If the woodcutter appealed for forgiveness for the pain caused while cutting, how can it be refused?. When trees are destroyed, there will be changes in nature. We are not responsible for any such thing. Please remember that too!

Although with great hesitation, Ayyappan advised his son: "Don't sell the honey-sweet jack tree. Hasn't it fed our children?" Surendran looked around without lifting his face. Apart from his father, his wife and children too waited to hear his response. He murmured in distaste: "It's only a jack tree, let it go." In despair, Ayyappan drew back his gaze.

Leela's voice came, "Because of this tree, our children haven't starved."

"Your children can starve a bit."

"H'm! The envious neighbours will laugh."

"Let them."

"Remember that nobody else has a tree like this."

"It did not come here as your dowry. If it goes, we can plant fifty to sixty saplings of rubber. If they yield well, we shall have three or four kilos of sap everyday."

Leela was a sceptive tempered by experience. "For rubber to grow, don't you have to wait for six to seven years? Who knows if rubber will then get a good price?"

Ayyappan added, "Yes, after felling and selling a majestic jack tree."

Surendran was furious. "Mustn't I pay my debts and feed you all?"

"Yes, you lout. In my better days, I toiled day in and day out to make all that we have. Except for selling it and feeding yourself on it, have you made a pennyworth on your own?"

"Father, be quiet," the daughter-in-law interposed.

"Isn't Surendran home, ho!"

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"Who is it?"

It was Ayyappan who looked out from the door. There were three people in the courtyard with polished and whetted axes and thick ropes rolled up and slung across their shoulders.

"We have come to fell the jack tree."

Ayyappan was speechless and a shiver ran up his leg. As it gripped the chest, and caused spasms of pain, his throat became parched, his vision grew dim. It was impossible for him to keep watching the cutting down of even a single branch of the honey-sweet jack tree. When it was cut down, perhaps . . .No, with slow hesitant steps, Ayyappan got out and walked along, with the shudder of the earth shaking as the timber fell on his mind.

There were rubber saplings in plastic bags in the courtyard. The earth was bare and dry and desiccated and there were a few yawning pits. The water for drinking and bathing used to trickle in the shade of the jack tree. Through a small cleft in the rocks water would drip in and fill the pool, which was never dry. And they had never looked for an alternative.

In the pool the water was hot, drying up every minute. In the pits heaped with debris and mud, the rubber saplings, planted after the rains, faded with the coming of summer and stood with faces hung down. Leela made thatched sheds for them. When the ground was baked and turned into dust, the wind blew it off.

The water in the pool dried up completely. When Leela went down to a neighbour's well to fetch water in aluminum pitchers, the owner of the house said: "How shall I say it? It is difficult to let you draw water daily."

"Just a pitcher of drinking water."

"Today for the last time."

The heat was oppressive. How could one sleep without a dip in water? Surendran peeped into the pots. All were empty.

"Isn't there any water at least to cool the body?"

"Where can I bring it from?"

As if to signify an end to the drought, there was a slow patter of rain. Great relief. The children were hungry and did not remember their quarrel. Seeing a corner of the courtyard crumble, Surendran shuddered. In the drizzle he went close to his wife who stood in the rain with her head covered with a cloth and looked out. The rubber saplings that had been planted three years ago ought to have grown to an arm's thickness by now. But they didn't, since the soil was washed away, and they were uprooted

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and fell. None of this was expected. There were only stones jutting out everywhere as though there was a cloudburst. Was his father mocking him from behind?

"Surendran, you don't know the relation between trees and the earth. If you cut down a tree, the roots will dry up, and the soil will be eroded by the rain and blown off by the wind. Stones that do not secrete drinking water will emerge. Can't you leave this place and go somewhere else?"

"Whereto, Father?"

Translated from Malayalam by Sreela

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The Reason

Paa. Raghavan

The head office of the Public Works Department where generally public works are not got done at a fast pace. Fans too high above, rotating slowly. Wide open windows. Papers on the tables fluttering in the breeze from the sea. The peon who comes to enquire whether one will have coffee. The typist who is talking about Kamal Hasan. The section officer's voice in English sounding somewhat non-human. The assistant at the next table looking at the race-tips in the newspaper. Sethuraman who shuts up his pen and cracks his fingers. This is his first day at the dirty red building— like the Bay of Bengal—where he has come on transfer.

"Meet Mr. Sethuraman...."

The process of being introduced to assistant after assistant was not so pleasant. He got his first shock, like a blow on the check, when he came to the cashier's table.

"This is Priya, the deity who doles out to us our sustenance on the first day of every month."

He looked up and was stunned.....

"Sorry, please don't take us amiss... My daughter is not interested in this alliance..."

Humming and hawing, all perspiration, Sivaprakasam, Priya's father, had stammered the words out.

"Idiot! Who asked him to announce in advance that he liked the girl? See now, that slip of a girl has said that she does not like him. Where will he hide his face now? Of course it is a very ordinary matter whether an alliance materialises or not. But should we give up our grip over the situation? Should he not have opened his mouth only after she had expressed her consent? I am not speaking like a male chauvinist. After all it is we that have to bear the insult...."

Father had gone out after his outburst.

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The term 'insult' was a bit too strong, he thought. He had not yet pondered over the affair. Is it an insult to a boy if a girl refuses to marry him? What would be the case if he had refused the girl? According to the code devised by society such a refusal is no insult to the girl. It is only something routine.... Just one more refusal....

But it had not occurred to him to say 'no' to this girl. Of course she was not a great beauty, nor was her family prosperous. Just middle class with the usual monthly chits, grocery dues, black and white T.V etc.; she belonged to the same department as he, both drew almost the same salary and had the same educational status, which he considered additional positive factors. So he was willing to marry her and announced his choice without hesitation when he went to see the girl. His father felt that they should not have put forward their opinion first.

"Do you know why people always say 'ladies first'? Do you think it is to show respect to femininity? Not at all! Some fellow might have at some time suffered a similar blow. Then he would have invented this motto to be on the safe side."

Father belonged to the 'opinionated' type. He believed dogmatically that only his opinions were correct. It was not necessary for the son to pay importance to them. But what was required for the son's slightly aching heart was neither advice nor consolation, but to be merely left alone.

But nobody was prepared to leave him alone. His mother declared that there was no need to be upset because of that arrogant girl. She would herself select for him a wealthy bride of unparalleled beauty and having all wifely qualities. After declaring this she tightened her sari-end and visited her neighbours in an attempt to solicit their sympathy, "What is wrong with my son?"—and thereby putting him to more embarrassment. When he rebuked her pleadingly for making so much noise over the matter, she turned on him. "You talk big only to me, but made yourself a laughing stock before that chit of a girl!"

When he was mentally praying for at least a temporary release from this wretched situation, he got the order of transfer to the head office. He had packed his things and come away gladly. But fate had transferred the girl too to the same office.

There was one consolation however. Her seat was in a corner and his seat was in the opposite corner. One could see the other only if one shifted the body a little and craned the neck. And why should one look at the other? No need of course. But he could not avoid turning his head in her direction once every ten minutes. He felt uneasy. On those occasions he was asking himself only one question—why did she refuse him?

If she casually looked in his direction while talking to a female

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colleague., he had the uncomfortable feeling that she was perhaps saying, "See that man. He had come to 'see' me, with an army of relatives. I refused to marry him...."

When she came to someone near his table with a file or voucher pad, he would feel a noxious churning in the pit of his stomach; his agitation would not cease till she returned to her table.

The age-old male ego would sometimes raise its head—should a man allow himself to cringe? But this ego never got the upper hand. It does not have much of a chance in the emotional sphere of a middle class citizen. What generally raises its head is the self-pity that flagellates and mangles one.

In his 'bachelor' room, on lazy Sundays, for a few minutes before his afternoon siesta, he would imagine conversations with her in the office canteen or on the grassy ground beside the beach. On those occasions they would be meeting by chance and would be alone.

She would speak first "'I' am sorry...."

At that time he would not have any resentment against her; nor would he be nursing an ego. He would have attained the equanimity of a sadhu who had conquered passions. He would speak in a firm, but calm, voice—"I have no grievance. Everyone has got the right to choose as one wishes. But, don't you think that a proper reason should be given for the rejection? ....Further, you could yourself have explained the matter to me. I would not have minded at all..."

She would be completely floored by his maturity and magnanimity. The Bay of Bengal would be roaring in the background. She would be keeping her head bowed. Two tear-drops would be waiting to fall down from the corners of her eyes.

Concealing his inner anger he would say gracefully, "Please, collect yourself..."

By this time sleep would have overcome him.

But when he saw her the next day in the office, the imaginary conversation of the previous day won't be of any use. A heavy silence would grip him mentally. After suffering distress the whole day he would sink in a heap on return to his room.

Ten days had passed. He had not spoken to her even once. He carefully kept away from her. Only once, when he was going out of the section officer's room the officer told him, "Please ask the cashier to come to my room." He had to go to her table and relay the officer's message.

She did not even look up. She pushed in the table's drawers at once, pushed her chair behind and stood up. Then she proceeded towards the officer's room without even a passing glance at him. She was thinking too

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much of herself, he felt. He got angry. Controlling himself he returned to his table.

It appeared to him that he could not continue in that office for long. He did not mind the disappointment and disgrace he had already suffered. But he felt that he was suffering unbearable agitation when she was near—agitation arising from the fear that his office colleagues might come to know what had happened earlier between them.

Further, women do not keep secrets. If they come across juicy stuff they are overjoyed. He thought that they create gossip-worthy matters just for the heck of it.

The typist and the officer's secretary assembled at the girl's table during tea time, lunch intervals and whenever the officer was absent. They had always matters to talk about-sometimes loudly, sometimes in whispers. He suffered untold agony whenever she whispered to them.

There are many things to be achieved in life. Marriage is not an achievement. To fail in the first attempt to get married is not a big failure. But what is causing excruciating pain is having to see the person who has caused the failure. For the same reason it is difficult for him to move with the others also normally.

Some people had already asked him why he was not moving with them freely. He would just move away from them without a reply after flashing a friendly smile. It was not that he had taken a vow not to speak to any of his colleagues. But the feeling that she was always watching him was overpowering. In that condition, to talk to others—even not talking to them—was an embarrassment. Whenever he looked in her direction she was looking at him straight or sideways. When she felt he had noticed her she would call someone's name loudly as if to prove that she was not looking at him.

This happened not once or twice but many times. He could very well take her by surprise, go to her and speak to her a few words. But who was to break the ice? And what to say?

Even when he went to 'see' her he did not talk to her. He was talking only to her father. Even when she came before him and his relations, who were sitting in a bunch, to do the customary obeisance, he had gently remained aloof as proof that he was not particular about such formalities.

He did not ask questions such as whether the girl could sing, or whether she was a good cook. He just listened to what her parents said about her attainments, believed them and announced his approval in the open assembly in a dignified manner. She conveyed her unwillingness through her father only two days later.

Was she really an arrogant girl as his mother said? But what special

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virtue did she have to justify such arrogance? She was not a paragon of beauty nor did she have a high education and she did not have a prosperous family background. Did she perhaps think that his personality was inferior to hers? At the thought of the last possibility his ego raised its head. Nobody had till then commented adversely on his personality. He assured himself that he had a graceful personality with his combed hair, genial face, decent dress and refined conversation.

He decided that he should give his would be wife a priceless life of peace, comfort, companionship and love. He told himself that it was not he who had suffered a loss because of what had happened. Nevertheless, he could not avoid thinking of her or stealthily looking at her. On such occasions he could not do his work naturally. And any such work is bound to be of indifferent quality.

It was not a big thing that he had passed a month like this. Today he had to take his pay, and that too from her only. O God, how could he face that moment of tension? Would she be having the same tension? She should have, if she was one to give importance to feelings. But he was surprised that she had never exposed herself. How could she command such firmness and poise? He had noticed that when she happened to speak to some people together she skillfully avoided him without anyone else noticing that she did so. What an attractive pride, cleverness in such a young person.

Distribution of salary commenced at four in the evening. The staff forgot their miseries, stood before her, laughed, counted their salary amount and left. The office would become empty in two minutes. She would have to wait for him to come for his salary. How would she call him then?

"Sir, What are you thinking of? Cashier madam is calling you." The peon told him loudly.

With a deep sigh he went and sat before her. She calmly handed over to him his salary envelope and said, "Please check the amount."

He did not check the amount; instead he kept staring at her—she who was sitting there innocently after turning him inside out like a storm.

He could not himself decide whether it was anger, or hate, or a feeling of impotence, or disgust, or pain that rose in him suddenly upsetting him. Well, this uneasiness was not going to abate as long as she was near.

"Do you love someone?" he asked her abruptly.

Reflecting surprise and shock in her eyes, she said hurriedly, "No...."

"Then why did you do like that? Don't you think it was an indecent manner of expressing one's opinion?" She was stunned. She had not expected him to question her like this. She remained with her head bowed, rolling the pencil with her fingers.

"Sorry, I demand an explanation."

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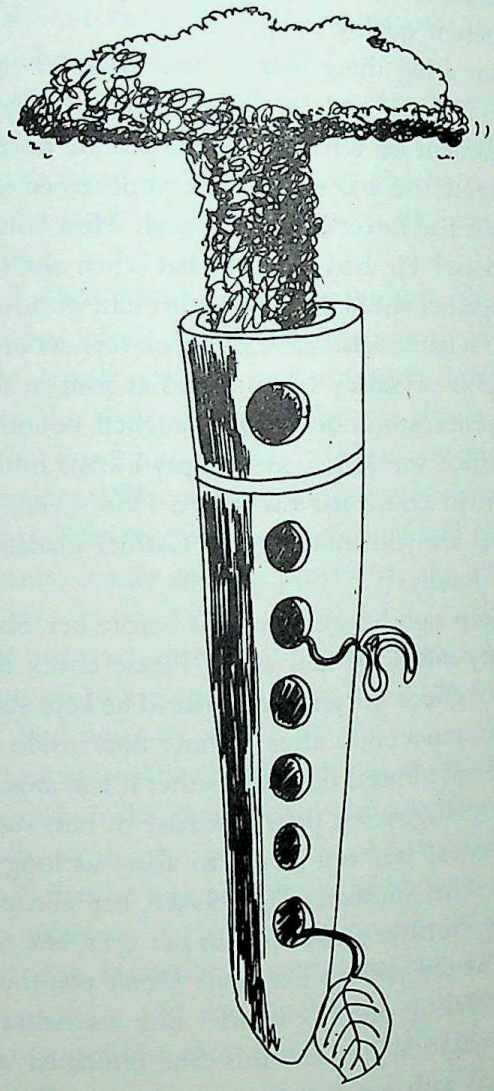
"What explanation?"

"An explanation for your behaviour....."

She locked her drawer and stood up. Then she looked at him steadfastly as if she had made up her mind. Then, after an interval of a second, she said, "I know the pain of being rejected. I wanted to enjoy the pleasure of rejecting at least once. That is why."

Translated from Tamil by S. Krishnamoorthy



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Stop, Intezaar Hussain

Rajee Seth

This happened around the time Intezaar Hussain's *Bastee* was published. Immediately he went to the bookshop and bought a copy. And slipped his brand new copy of the book into the rack at the head of his bed.

Slipping it in, he counted the books in the rack again. *Bastee* was the tenth book to come out on Partition. In these ten books lay enclosed an important part of his life. He was sure he would need these books some day compellingly. Reading them he would be reading his own past, his own life.

But life – his or others' – moved on. And his compelling need didn't arise. One day his wife said: "Take these books away. The children need the rack."

He stared hard at his wife. She told him to stop staring at her like that. She was not scared of him as in earlier days. Calamities had hardened her. Nothing scared her now, nothing whatsoever.

He made an effort to put force into his retort. He did succeed in this, sometimes. How did the saying go—"One stroke of the ironsmith's equals one hundred of the goldsmith's."

"I have said not once but many times that this rack will stay where it is, at the head of my bed. And these books too. Whoever moves it will see me dead."

It was the kind of statement he'd always called female; threatening with death and dying when intelligence failed. Emotional blackmail.

He was the one speaking this language now, because he could not honestly see what could be a more clinching argument to shore up his refusal to empty the rack.

Her sagged cheeks shook in a kind of helpless rage. She didn't set much store by her husband's threat, but she could not openly laugh off a threat of this kind.

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She flung to the ground the cardboard box she'd brought along for storing the books and called out in a resounding voice in the direction of the children's room. "No rack, no nothing for you, do you hear? Throw round your books just where you like. Your grandfather must have everything before anyone else."

The children were nowhere around. It was for him, he knew well enough. For him, to show him up a mean old man, by setting off the children's need against his stubbornness. But he knew equally well that the rack was to stay where it was, was simply not to he moved from there. These books had to be near him, within reach. In the contents of the books, the pulse of his life throbbed quietly. Some day he was sure to get time. Some day, for sure, he would be sitting amidst them reading his past. What if the day hadn't come so far, given his strong longing for it, it was bound to come. And God forbid, removed from sight they get buried in cellars.

His stung wife didn't speak to him through the evening. The next day too she kept up the face off. On a pile of things kept in a corner of the room after the white washing, she loaded the children's books higgledy-piggledy. It was a fling at him that she was making. She could have looked for another corner if she'd wanted to.

He decided not to take notice of it. And, getting smaller day by day, one fine day the heap vanished. He didn't think it necessary to find out which other corner the children had found. As on all days, he left for his work at the furniture factory.

If... If... If.... If he had known that his wife's life span was so short, and that she would die soon, he would most certainly have abandoned his stubbornness. He would have spread out the books on a plank under his bed.

He did not know. Nobody knows anything. Things meant to happen, happened, without so much as a by-your-leave. A sharp pain in the chest does not always prod death...why then did she die? Slumped into his arms, within the blink of any eye, as if taunting him, "O.K., it's all yours, children, rack, books, the whole caboodle;" never would she be butting in now.

He felt cheated. Almost enraged. Rage not so much over the squabble about the rack, as over a lot of other things. Her rank disloyalty at leaving him half way....Flare-ups and bickering now were the agreed terms of exchange between them, not this rude exit.

The cold wind now cuts deeper into the rib cage. His heart also hurts more. But why crib now about aches and pains?

Now there is no need to spread out the books on a plank under the bed. He himself had given up the room, making it over to the children, and has set up camp on the takht in the front room. For the children he

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has bought a new rack. His, he has put at the head of his bed. Exactly as before, in anticipation of his dire need.

When she was alive it never ever crossed his mind that between wife and books no relationships ever gets built. Books lay around because they have no link with the life that goes through living. No give and take, no incursion into each other's territory. If it did, would he have assembled just these handful of books on the carnage after the country's Partition? Just ten books to speak about the massacre of lakhs! The Jews have proved cleverer, smelting their tragedy and sending it afloat into the arteries of the world. Was there no lionheart to describe this indescribable tragedy in this country.

No, he is thinking wrong, the correction comes on its own. Those who write are one class, and those uprooted, another. The uprooted have no time for words, nor the nerve to feel into their palms the embers smouldering under their soles and study them. Look at his own self. For years the books have been calling him from the head of his bed, and he... he....

If he'd read these books, perhaps, he'd have been free of their spell; his heaviness of heart lessened. He would have read them like fiction. They would go clear of his mind. Right now he doesn't even know what's in them. All he knows is that in them lies buried the balance sheet of his past and its mute pains.

Today....

On the morning of Independence Day, sitting before the TV he is feeling different, stirred beyond reckoning. This day comes every year – twice a year infact – when he sees the screen as he would see the happenings in other people's life but today.... Perhaps to certain events we are ever sensitive, with or without knowing. Perhaps it is like dampness under the roots that never dries up and ever courses. Otherwise how else would he stand head bowed, hands folded leaving his chair abruptly on hearing the sound of national anthem the being played on the screen. Alone in the room, he found himself standing till the last fading echoes of the refrain 'Jaye He, Jaye He, Jaya Jaya, Jaya Jaya He.' It happened to him involuntarily, like a moment wakening the whole of destiny. You never come to know what and which branch of the tree of memory is being shaken, where. Our leisure hours perhaps bring to our door, the saga of the past.

His grand-daughter Sweetee comes into the room. The sky in the TV screen is a-wash with balloons painted the colours of independence, and he sinks within.

It is Fifteenth of August today, the fortieth year of the country's freedom. What a length of time, uphphph. He re-winds time to his own

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speed and site.He was nineteen when he left Lahore, Nikkee's image housed in his eyes like an intransigence. Riveted there.

Now he is forty plus nineteen. That is, forty years past the freedom war. From then to now, forty plus nineteen, full fifty nine. Fifty nine - a half-baked age, neither centre-field, nor to the boundary.

To see grandfather lost thus, to see him 'not there', makes Sweetee impatient. This is just the kind of thing that has made her flee her father. "Papa is useless grandpa." She complains. "Never listens to me. Work, work, work—all the time work" Even today when it is a holiday for her, and he has to take her out to see the lights.

"The lights will be at night, child", he reins in Sweetee's mounting rage. "Not night. Evening", she bridles.

"All right, evening. But evening's still a whole afternoon away, and anyway what's the point going with me? If I go, it'll be on foot...."

"I too will go on foot..."

But by the evening it is peace between Sweetee and her papa. He'd known all along it would be so, that Sweetee would not go with her grandpa. That she'd go in the car with her father. And she wouldn't meet grandpa's eye, would look away, and say, "It's like this, see, grandpa, why don't you also come with us....'

He laughs, so long and so much that tears sprout from his eyes. How would Sweetee know that he is not to go anywhere today? That he is to sit around the house alone! A something has been knocking at his attention for God knows how long now. He has to put it close and see it, see it face to face. Surrender himself.

Everybody has gone. A hush lies all round, but the mind is not at peace. Why is it not? If it is silent without and din within, how fearsome it seems! In a daze he sits down by the books. *Jhootha Such* first? ? No. *Aag Ka Daria*? No, not that either...Then *Udas Nuslein*? No, this too, no. Finally he pulls out Intezaar Hussain's *Bastee*. A slim volume, easily folded, its slimness decides him.

He knows well enough that a book is a book only till it remains in the rack, carrying between its two covers long, horizontal lines. Once out of the rack it becomes something else, something other.

Intezaar Hussain had begun the book in the name of the city. Swearing by the city. But which city can this be. Actually where the hero, Zakir, is in search of his first day in a new city of a new country? This sense of displacement, puzzles him from the word go.

In God's name how could a new country come up on old soil... and in the new country a new city? And in the new city a stranger, an unknown citizen, is looking for his first day: the first sacred day bathed by the flush of freedom.

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He cannot for the life of him understand whether to laugh or cry at this irony of a new country on old land. To feel the 'sacred' in the fire of freedom is the sole dividend to bear in mind, none of this grouping around. Mostly it is the same dark, the same gloom, the same sadness he has never forgotten. The very sadness, foreboding and darkness about which Intezaar Hussain writes farther on. On each succeeding page a shadowy nervous agitation quivers. A lot is being said, but nothing is clear. In place after place are accounts of trickery, firing, of curfews in the offing, heated debates in coffee houses about 'agents of imperialism' and 'mongrels of compromise'. Nothing but straws in the wind and motes of dust preceding a major catastrophe brush his understanding as he turns the pages.

He loses heart, feels outside it all even while standing dead centre in a circle of flames.

His unhappiness grows. No! None of this is what he had been wanting to, waiting to, read. But what? Wanting to waiting to, read what? He cannot tell. Which part of the past is he so avid to touch?

In great agitation he turns the pages at random. So far he hasn't even got the name of the city where the hero is drifting around. Roads, turnings and by-lanes appear but without names. Nothing to identify them. Not that he does not know the names of the cities? Risen as if by the wave of a wand the names of the cities on this land would not have changed so soon.

So far, the hero's loafing around is all that he has gleaned, when abruptly breaks in a name he knew so well. Anarkali Bazaar. He reads: "Anarkali Bazaar — partly open, partly closed. A heavy crowd but no big buyers..."

The very name 'Anarkali Bazaar' stops him short in his tracks, Uphphph. Now at last Intezaar is identifying the city. He sits up. Feeling the need to sit up. This, yes this, is his own city! Lahore, Lahore, wait a while, Intezaar Hussain...

The narrative ahead, he feels, is about to take a turn to Mall Road. You must halt, Intezaar. Let me get my breath back.

But perhaps in Intezaar Hussain's hand the text of the novel is tugging at its reins. It is raring to wing forward. He stops on his own. Pausing long and repeatedly to read the passages twice over, thrice over. Sitting on this side of the border now, he is reading the face of his city there, on that side. Rapt. Swallowing the lumps in his throat.

Now a new eye wakes in him. He walks in step with the hero. "The hero" Intezaar Hussain writes "is relishing his walk in the new country. From the first road to the second, from the second to the third..." God knows how long he keeps pace with the hero. "After ages, after countless numbers

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of years he is walking there free, free of the nagging fear that somebody scraping past him would stick a knife into him."

He is reading about the caravans of refugees entering the city, and his mind is in a turmoil. He, among the myriads forced out of Lahore. If it is Walton Camp this side, it is D.A.V. College camp that side.

Moving with Intezaar's text, he advances farther. "In Sham Nagar so many houses stood empty. Doors and windows wide open; whole sets of furnishings visible through the open windows. It looked as if the people going away just rose to their feet, wrapped themselves and stepped out.

Uphphphph. How did you know all this Intezaar Hussain? But you should have known, still, that it was not Sham Nagar, a vicinity. It was Sant Nagar... his home...his locality.

The evening hadn't waned yet. Father came in fast and halted dead centre in the yard. Heavy lines of tension were on his forehead and his hands sank into the dip of his waist. Eyes fixed on the tongues of flames in the *choolah*. A cooking vessel was on it.

A knob of ginger held in her hand, Mother came in, and he said, "Take down that vessel."

"Whatever for? The dal's hardly done yet."

"Just take it down!" Temper didn't ring in his voice, but what rang was nothing mild either.

Seeing his mood, Mother held the vessel with the ends of a dish cloth and brought it down. Father turned, filled the bucket from the hand pump and poured down a thick jet of water on the 'choolah.' The flames died. The choolah slumped with the black slurry of ash and soot.

"Now listen. And pay attention... those people have come. At the head of the lane they are now. Hurry and look sharp. We must go this minute."

"Where?"

"To the camp. The D.A.V. College camp. The government holds out no safety to those sticking it out in houses. We will have to stay there for now. Hurry. Just shove in some clothes..."

Into a long canvas bag he was squeezing in a blanket.

His unmistakable fluster now had its effect on Mother. Scared, she said, "Clothes, yes. But upstairs all the windows and doors are wide open."

"O forget about doors and windows, woman. Get out double quick. Have you no idea.." He leaned across to whisper into her ear.

"Wait, Father. I'll go close the doors and windows...."

He bounded towards the staircase, but where did he have his wits around to close the doors and windows of the middle floor? His sole attention was set on Nikkee, on warning her: reaching the terrace where he had his hush-hush trysts with her.

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Living a house away from his, every time Nikkee's face appeared, from the grill of his roof he knew he had to go up. Up to the terrace. By any means. Go up and gratify her naughty demands. Standing in the closed stairway down the back of the house, Nikkee would be waiting for him. He had to go to her and squeeze her in his arms. Squeeze her so hard – so hard – that....

He remembered how once, under the pressure of his maddened muscles, a scream escaped her. In a panic that her brother Kirpal would be somewhere around he clamped his hand on her mouth. So hard that she backed away and tumbled down a couple of steps. Her back bruised of course, but her knee got injured too. A swelling came up on the joint.

"Roshan, you've gone crazy for sure today...What'll I tell them below?" She was scared.

"O come on. Tell them anything. Excellent fibber that you are..."

That evening he learnt from his mother that Nikkee – Chawla Saheb's daughter – had had a fall in the school. That her back had bruised. That a mute pain in the knee had risen. A mute pain, his mother said was nasty goes on and on. He also learnt that later in the evening his mother would be going to Nikkee's to ask how she was.

About his generous offer to close the doors and windows he clean forgot on the very first step of the staircase. He wanted to clear the steps in one single leap. And alert Nikkee of what he'd heard his father say about the balvaais (rioters). Alert her. His mind drummed Nikkee.... Nikkee.... Nikkee.... Nikkee would't half know the things his father knew... that they had come in, were breaking into houses.

Butchering the men folk, hauling them out and tying them to trees. And under their very eyes, stripped their women... uphphphph. His breath choked.

The moment he set foot on the terrace he went into stark terror. From down below rushed up a torrent of screams and pleas. Perhaps they had come up to Nikkee's house. A balvaai stood guard on the top step of the stairway from Nikkee's terrace. He still remembers the eyes of that brute—like burning coals, and the tight black band round his jaw...

As Roshan advanced, a thundering voice rent the air. "You there! Twerp! Freeze up... I'll take care of you, else..." Without moving he aimed the glinting tip of his javelin at Roshan.

He does not now remember when his father came up to the terrace in search of him. When he gave him a kick on his back with the flat of

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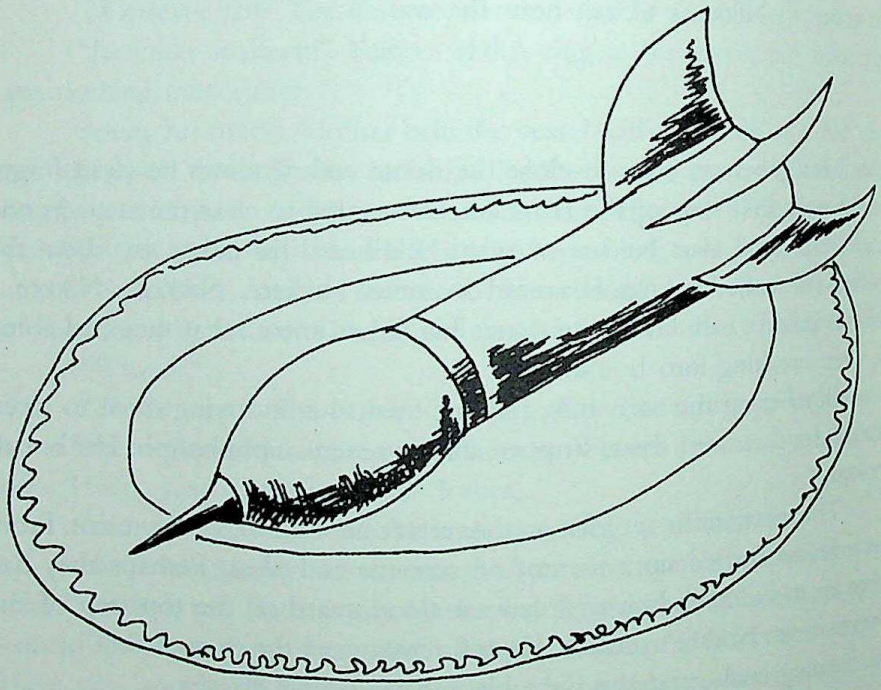
his sole. When did he drag him all the way down the stairs. He remembers his father's hard, vise-like grip round his wrist, and ringing in his ears, Nikkee's wounded, rising scream. A scream like that of an animal, not yet dead, through whose flesh a maniac draws out a serrated knife. Draws it out.Keeps Drawing...

Pain floods him. Now. Forty plus nineteen years later. He breaks down. Falls apart. Drilling the hard crust of massed ice he cried. Sobbed. Sobbed without let as if a scream condensed in the breast of time suddenly starts melting. Melting steadily drop after drop.

All this happening now. After all these years. To an old man of nineteen and forty years who had willed then, this is a war for freedom. Over this was none of us ever to cry. For any loss. Any time.

Translated from Hindi by Raji Narasimhan

❑



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N. Balamani Amma: A Tribute

K. Satchidanandan

With the demise of Balamani Amma, Malayalam poetry has lost its mother-figure. Serene, profoundly committed to human values and liberal ideals, mature in her understanding of the deeper paradoxes of the human condition, deeply traditional yet innovative in vision and form, Balamani Amma stands alone in her generation. She does share some of the concerns of the poets with whom she grew up, like Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon, Idassery Govindan Nair, P. Kunhiraman Nair and G. Sankarakurup but she had a distinct voice of her own : a distinction given not so much by her gender as by the tone and timbre of her poetry. It is not surprising that she continues to inspire two successive generations of women poets who have succeeded her, Sugathakumari and Vijayalakshmy being the best examples respectively from the two generations.

Critics have spoken of the three streams of her poetry that often flow into one another. In the first phase represented by her early works like *Kooppukai* (Folded Hands), *Amma* (Mother), *Kudumbini* (The Home-maker), *Dharmamargathil* (In the Path of Dharma), *Prabhankuram* (The Bud of Light) *Bhavanayil* (In Imagination), *Streehrdayam* (A Woman's Heart), *Oonjalil* (On the Swing) and *Kalikkotta* (The Toy Basket), she presents the emotional world of mother and child. The whole world is transformed into a child by her imagination so that even its misdeeds appear like pranks and even its uglier aspects seem to enhance its beauty. At times the reverse happens; the 'I' of the poem appears like a child and the universe, its mother. In any case, the central paradigm is the mother-child relationship : it illuminates and defines the poet's worldview.

In the second phase represented by works like *Velichathil* (In the Light), *Avar Padunnu* (They Sing), *Pranaman* (Homage), *Lokantarangalil* (In Many Worlds), *Muttassi* (The Grandmother), *Ambalathil* (In the Temple) and *Nagarathil* (In the City), the poet explores the relationship between man and society. She tries to diagnose the society's ills; the mother here is a nurse, or a doctor,

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treating those ills. It is at this stage that she develops a penchant for the dramatic monologue and begins to employ myths and legends to make oblique, often symbolic, statements on society. Parasurama in the famous poem "Mazhuvinte Katha" (The Tale of the Axe) embodies the remorse that follows the realization of the futility of violence while Viswamitra in the poem of that name is a symbol of modern technology that realizes at the end of the day that what matters is not technical virtuosity but love, compassion and sacrifice.

The final phase is one of synthesis where the individual merges into the community. Bhishma who voluntarily opts for the bed of arrows for having hurt Amba and Valmiki who realizes that he has no right to curse the hunter as he himself has renounced his family and is no different from that savage are both individuals caught in the paradoxes of life while they also represent the larger community's sense of guilt and penance. Balamani Amma's poems in the last collections, *Sopanam* (The Stairs) and *Naivedyam* (Offering) have for their common undercurrent the Jungian idea of collective unconscious, the storehouse of mankind's collective memory.

In *Naivedyam*, her central collection that got her the Saraswati Samman, she explores three major themes : the role of woman in society, the plight of the human community and the spiritual core of man's existence. She looks at women in her many roles as the beloved, housewife, mother, grandmother, working woman, servant-maid and the vengeful Durga. In another set of poems, she takes up the questions of freedom, fraternity, and the dimensions of Indian culture. In a third set, she investigates the relationships between man and nature, man and his/her self and man and God. The symbolic poem "Naivedyam" (Offering) sums up her vision most beautifully. The idol in the temple fascinates the child : it is incarnate sacredness domesticated. The people who circumambulate the deity represent the society of the grown-ups. The sanctum-sanctorum of the mind, the poem suggests, leads to the realization of the potential for transcendence within the individual.

Balamani Amma, even while being deeply involved with the problems of the world, was also detached in her own way, a detachment that enhanced her ability to look at reality with cool dispassion. This is a capacity found in the greatest of poets, from Vyasa to Kabir who belonged yet did not belong. As a poet, she is aware of the world of passions: of desire, vanity, envy, longing for power and for retribution, passions that she subjects to close examination and intense meditation in her best moments : but her focus is on the *satwik* element and hence like Robert Browning, she believes that there is a soul of goodness even in the worst of human beings. For example she knows what prompts Parasurama to annihilate the *kshatriyas*, what

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disturbs Viswamitra and why Vibhishana feels that at times *dharma* can be as unkind as *adharma*. For the poet they are not dead archetypal figures, but characters from contemporary life. It is so with Kubja who transcends her physical deformity with spiritual bliss or Chyavana whose inner eye opens as he loses his outer eye. Her poems on Mahabali, Yayati, Vasuman, Dhanwantari, Bishma, Mahavira, Valmiki, Pratardana, Sibi and Ashtaka also go to the intellectual essence of the mythical situations they are in, thus transforming them into metaphors for the states of man.

Balamani Amma treats social realities too in an oblique way as in *Naxalite Ratri* (The Naxalite Night); she recognizes that the exploiter deserves death, as wages of his sin but she does not scream aloud, instead internalizes the social reality, illuminates the inside of the slain landlord and makes the society feel guilty. Her spirituality is but an extension of her social being as it was with the poets of the *bhakti*; her God walks the earth on naked feet. She was against bigotry of every kind, and condemned violence in all its forms. She redefined *dharma* in our own context and had deep psychological insight into characters and situations.

She declared that the thorn that pierces anyone's feet will hurt *her* soul and any stone hurled at any man or beast would make *her* bleed and purify her soul. She also knew that 'the lamps one lights only for oneself emit thick smoke' that darkens other lives. She asks her poetry : "Will the future generations enjoy, through you, these burning passions the charming world awakened in me? Or will your lines scatter like the ritual rice offered to the dead, speaking of the lost values and unreal joys of some ancient past?" If integrating ethical concerns with aesthetic involvement is the chief mission of poetry Balamani Amma is certain to be read and remembered as long as the art of poetry survives in Malayalam.

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My Poetry

Balamani Amma

There is a poet in every man, making each and every moment more enjoyable, rendering grandeur to each and every karma. It is the homage of India's people to that genius that, through ages, has nurtured and developed human culture, this frail *Muthassi,* Grandmother, is recipient of, today. Let the poet awake and act through India's millions of lives, I pray.

I place before this great city resounding with the creative efforts of free India, the small lamp I lit from a village home where lamps of worship burn and sacred books abound. Today that lamp burns with the eternal thirst of this ancient country, the thirst for love and peace.

There is no child who is not a painter, nor a youth who is not a poet. Childhood and youth are times of glorious experiences. It is when the human soul comes in rapport with the whole universe, its fellow beings, even with an individual, that such experiences are born. Then the lamps of dreams shine; the ideals are enshrined. These lamps are not to die out. These idols are not to be toppled down. But it is by incessant 'Tapas' alone that these can be kept intact throughout one's life-time. Through this Tapas of love and sacrifice the poet is reared and nourished. The best poetry is not what is written; but what is lived. So, there can be many poets than we ever imagine.

And poetry is not a mirror of life as it is. It is the emergence of what is essential in it, what is noblest in it. It is the ideal of life the poet sets his heart upon, rather than his worldly life and experiences, that finds expression in poetry. One could not expect the heights looming there to be scaled in the poet's life. A poet's aim, more than anyone else's, must be to bridge the gap between his ideal and his life. But there are limits. I believe that a human

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This Speech was made in the Awardees' Meet after Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965)

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soul achieves perfection only in the moment of a great sacrifice such as described in "Mahabali". I also feel that such a moment is bound to occur to every man, in this life or in a future one. Yet, it has to be still a dream to me.

I do not think that poetry is created as an escape from sorrows of life. Rather, it can be said, that sorrows are transformed into splendid visions through poetry. A poet tastes sorrows of life as eagerly as its joys. But his tears are not handed over to readers without first transforming them into gems. Sometimes, tragedy wrecks a man. In case of a poet who is in love with the universe, it gradually leads him into Nirvrithi, inner peace.

Among my works, *Muthassi* excels in optimism. There one finds the afternoon daylight rippling under green leaves and the refreshing feeling of concord with the world at large. There, sorrow turns into peace.

For me writing poems is as sacred as prayer. The time after fulfilling all household chores, is dedicated to writing. To get a feeling of leisure, often I write lying down. How much time can a poet take to finish a poem in full satisfaction? One may have to spend days over a word; one may find many faults in a poem already finished, going over it a second time, and the pleasant task has to be started all over again. For a plane of good poetry to, and an even expanse of time is needed. The only crop that endures is that which is sown in repose; but nourished in work. In my experience, the sick bed often awakened the creative urge.

Yes, these are my experiences. But this may not be true in all cases. For this industrial era, the rhythm of march is quicker. The ultramodern poetry with its new forms and styles bear evidence to the fact that creative talent can adapt itself to such surroundings also. I was surprised to be told by a young poet that it was in his busiest days he wrote poems; man today, leaving behind the primitive forests, the peaceful glades where cattle grazed and the villages where social relations are tighter, has, reached the cities. The poet in him may be perplexed, yet the has not yet lost his balance. Here also, he must be able to see beauty and splendour, to listen to the divine message.

Translated from Malayalam by V.K. Narayana Menon

Courtesy: V.K. Madhavan Kutty

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N. Balamani Amma

A Mother's Heart

After greeting the Sun, the mother turns
to household chores, but her eyes linger
on her little child playing in the yard.
Atoms of sunshine whirl round her
The graceful creepers dance, the calves
Frolic, the butterflies flit, the world
Seems to the mother, playful like a child
Mother hears the prattle of her child
Watch us, cry the wavelets of the stream
Look! our newest toys, murmur the trees
Swinging flowers, the sky is golden,
chirp the little birds and, the lizards
proudly climb the mango tree. Look,
Oh, look! This childish prattle thrills the mother.
Leaving her work half-done she hastens
to kiss her child. A breeze yearning then
For caress clutches at the hem of
the mother's sari, the bees hover round
the ants pinch her soles. This makes the mother
happy, this playful mood of a great
world. Of, Mother, whose love, whose embrace
are you seeking, when all the creatures
of the world flock round you and, you are
Mother to them all?

(1934)

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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Mahabali*

O moment supreme!
It lights up my soul like the flame of a votive lamp.
My eyes are set close and clear thereon, and
other things fade and fail.
This indeed seems most precious of all that I have
earned in a long and abundant life.
This morning, amidst the lights of sacrificial fires,
the immanent one reveals himself to me.
To me, he who rules over heaven, earth and hades,
comes asking for my world as alms.
All that is mine I shall now place in
the outstretched hands of God.
Be kind to measure, and take, O Lord of Karma,
the three realms I have won by dint of effort.
O, come to my help, fount of everlasting joy, in
this moment of absolute surrender, even as
you did in the times of acquisition.

As the hard-earned possessions accumulated in my
palace, and life got smothered, the doors did
burst open this way like dams when the tank
is full.

Nothing is asked here, nothing is taken, or hoarded.
Only incessant sacrifice is here.
All my earnings are turned into ashes by the
holy fires.

Yet my heart is not faint: it gains in vigour.
Still, one thing I feel it hard to part with:
The intense joy of serving others.

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* Mahabali was an Asura chief who reigned over the three worlds. He was renowned for his charity. Prompted by the jealous 'Devas, Lord Vishnu, in the disguise of a Brahmin boy, came to him and asked for a gift of three feet of earth. It was gladly granted. The boy's foot, as it measured the ground grew and grew in size covering the three worlds. Mahabali was expelled to nether regions, but an annual visit to earth was granted to him. Onam festival in Kerala is said to be in commemoration of this annual visit.

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But you command me to forego even that and
find Peace.

Then O Lord, take my offering.
All the waters in my pitcher should reach
your palms. Only the blind try to restrain the flow.
The atmosphere is heavy with the perfume of
burnt offerings, and songs of celestial beings
haunt my heart.
Far away, on the evergreen breast of earth,
nestles my palace, the toy house I built and
left behind.
And before me stretches your form amazing and
beautiful, enveloping the whole world.
O Liberator Supreme, place your feet on my head
swollen with pride;
Let my sacrifice be perfect.
Make me feel myself as a mere speck among
the spheres of creation enlivened by
the touch of your feet.
The unfathomable, where neither day nor night is,
swells around me.
This is Immortality.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Mother Goddess

Goddess, I am blessed
to enter your shrine
where the lords of time,
in age-long worship,
scatter the crimson flowers of dawn.

I did not come with gifts:
Or to ask for favours.
I merely paused
dizzy with wonder and joy,
at your feet.

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My moments swing
on the gleams of lamplight,
darting from inside.

'The day is ending'
The circling crowds say,
Hurrying along.

But can anyone fear or make haste
when your smile touches the soul?

Burnt out passions
as incense-smoke,
hug your feet.

My knowledge-lit lamps,
which made you lovelier:
Whatever I touch
turns into your fingertips.
What has this happy body to look for?
For what favour should my singing spirit
pray?

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

To My Daughter

Far far away in a hospital, daughter,
lying on a snow-white bed
are you, with pain's dark threads
weaving midnight into the day?

Do not be depressed.
When we, too full of life, rush overmuch and
need rest,
The Goddess of creation offers a sick-bed.
Lie, be refreshed; and get new vigour.
How many the pedestals, yet unclimbed!

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In this dew-wet courtyard, reading your poems
I wonder, did your spirit which causes life to flower
hurt you more than the body which grew in me
like a blossom.
These cocoons you formed to put to sleep
the worms gnawing at your core, burst open.
And wings, rising, fluttering and jostling,
swarm my mind.

Your mind may grow restless with sad thoughts,
Your body may be weary of household tasks,
But about you I hold no fear.
Your power of turning worms into butterflies
comforts me.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

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Kishori Charan Das

Saudamini Bhuyan

The autumn of this year is going to be remembered as a sad chapter in the literary history of the journals in Oriya literature. It is a matter of practice that the editors of these journals must be waiting eagerly to publish stories of the leading writers in Oriya including Kishori Charan Das. Their waiting is going to remain unfulfilled. KC Das is no more. He passed away in Delhi while undergoing treatment in All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Three months back, in a literary gathering in Delhi when I met the doyen of Oriya literature, I went up to him to get his blessing. He, as an elderly person, blessed me, a young translator and story-writer. He gave me some tips for making writing a career. He maintained his whole life without losing a day; there wouldnot have been a single day he could have remembered that he had not done his writing after his first book's arrival. He made it a point that one has to do writing as a ritual without which one's commitment to one's literature would be unfulfilled. Whatever responsibility he had as a senior officer in Central Government he did it every day. He made it a point that he went to the writing table every day. In his reading room he had separate tables for writing stories and other literary works. He believed that a human being has the capacity to do many works simultaneously. In Indian mythology it seems that one can do four works at least. This mythical belief is assimilated in his worldview. Such a disciplined man must have died as a self-satisfied man because he has left behind more than fifty books to his credit. He has contributed in almost all areas of literature. He has carved a place in the literary history of India as a major storywriter. He has eight volumes to his credit. These collections of stories are related to various aspects of the reality that surrounded him. He, as middle class man, kept his sensibility to social experience which explains that there is unity between his creativity and experience. He is honest to his internal self. He did not transgress his social boundary. He succeeded in

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articulating his social experience in a literary form that is closer to him. The middle class professionals are busy people who have no time to read a big novel. They can spend some time for reading a short story. In their everyday life, small events take place in their working place or in the family that can be translated into short stories. His urban upbringing the shaped his urban sensibility. He has visited various places in his working life, specifically all metropolies and major cities of the world. Whatever interesting thing takes place that leaves a mark in his life he speaks out easily. Once he sits with his grandchild in the West where the nurse narrating the details of the health-developments of the child, brought in a medical certificate. He gets amazed and produces a story as to how from cradle to grave the welfare state takes care of the human being, but in India, for every thing one has to struggle in the market. (Prithivira Sabu Tharu Sundar Nat) In the praise of his grandson born on a foreign soil he feels that the arrival of the grandchild brings a lot of pleasure and joy in our families. He understands the emotional world of the Oriental people that is different from the western world. All grandparents enjoy the company of their grand-children as he portrays in the above story. He has a tremendous command over literary craftsmanship. Whenever he portrays a small event with his pen he does it well. He has mastery over his style and presentation. He does not preach any ideology. He believes in the post-modernist theory of literature. The text itself speaks out ideas. A writer's preference is unimportant. Writing comes as natural as life moves on. Das quotes James Stuart who says that "I have to write stories or I believe I would die. It comes as natural a shaving, dressing eating."

Das has shaped a distinct literary style with a humanistic vision. He claims that writing itself is a commitment. It expresses a writer's relationship with various emotions. No writing can belong to any class or community. It belongs to the whole world. Though a writer takes ideas and experiences from an immediate environment, writing comes out of love for humanity. There is no nihilistic writing in the world. A writer writes because he must. It is an active and vibrant relationship. He writes in a language that he has learnt from his mother. While he is writing he carries the literary tradition built over centuries. He relates with other writers and other Indian literatures. In every writer there is an element of empathy. To quote him, "There is some comfort when I took around and find that quite a few of our writers in the present century have indeed been able to get past the ambivalences to a rare state of empathy. Premchand, Tarashankar and Gopinath Moahanty whom I have read extensively amaze me the way they have risen to great creative heights in dealing with 'those others' with hardly a false note. They are my inspiration and make me hope that a victory can be won... "Literature and Cultural Identity: A Personal Statement" Kishori Charan Das, in all his

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writings, show his commitment to humanity. His empathy gets articulated for the struggling and suffering middle class. His collections of stories carry the stamp of his creative talent. His important collections are the following: *Bhanga Khelana* (1961), *Laksha Vihanga* (1968), *Ghara Bahuda* (1968), *Manihara*(1970), *Thakura Ghara* (1975), *Nali Gulu gulu Sadhava Bohu*(1978), *Gaman*(1980) *Khelar na Ranga* (1982) *Bhinna Pauunsa* (1984) *Sita Lahari* (1986) and *Trango Mryutu* (1987). Many of these collections are translated into several Indian and foreign languages. He has himself translated some of his stories into English in which he was confident and competent. He felt that the English language was a part of Indian languages and spoke of the diversity of Indian culture. He has some collections of poems like *Mini Kaman* though readers look at him as a great storyteller. The Sahitya Akademi gave him due recognition by giving its award for his collection of stories *Thakura Ghara*. This prolific writer is no more with us. I pray to God that his soul remains in peace but with my opologies to him he was an atheist who used to worship work as God.

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The Last Story

Kishori Charan Das

Ganesh tells stories. Plain and simple. There were times when that "plain and simple" leapt up at Ganesh and made him squirm. See here, if you think my name is worthy of mention, "Ganesh said this at that literary convention", "Ganesh placed a wreath of flowers on the statue of that late dignitary", "Ganesh was present for the launching of so and so's new book", then why do you always have to preface it with the words, "the story-teller"? Why couldn't you give me a more imposing title, like "the noted author" or "the literary critic"? But no, every time there's the same worn out adjective in front of my name, "story teller". This Ganesh isn't a member of some grand fraternity; he's just one of a recognizable but insignificant club. Some people tell stories, don't you know? (Whatever you think that is, telling stories!) Anyway, he's one, of. them.

At this point in his ruminations Ganesh remembered something that his friend Yadu Mishra had once told him, thinking it was quite hilarious. Yadu's nephew Abhimanyu had come back to Orissa from Delhi, where he was studying. Yadu'd read an article to him from the Oriya paper just to be able to say to him, " And do you know who this story-telling Ganesh is? We were at school together. He's a good friend of mine." Abhimanyu had mischievously asked, "Story-telling Ganesh? Do you mean that this friend of yours does nothing but tell stories? What kind of stories does he tell, anyway?" Yadu Mishra just couldn't stop laughing. Ganesh wanted to say to him, " Look here, Mishra, he's young. What does he know? But what about you? When you phone up to chat, don't you people always ask me, "What's new? What are you doing now? Still writing stories?"

And not just you, Yadu, I've had to listen to comments like that, however well-intended, from all sorts of other people, all sorts of well-wishers, phrased in different ways "How's your story writing going?" "Wouldn't you like to write a story about us?" "I've a great idea. Why don't you write

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a story about this." As if that's all anyone can expect from me; as if it's all I can do.

"Never mind. It's not a bad way to pass the time. We need to tell stories, Ganesh, it helps take our mind off our troubles now and then. Thank you. Keep on writing, keep on writing..."

Ganesh couldn't help thinking that if he had to wear one literary hat, something that symbolized his creative talent, he would have preferred to have been a poet. Of course I've written some poems, even a novel, but for some reason, which even I don't understand, I just keep on writing stories and somehow the label "story-teller" has gotten stuck to me. If I'd been called a poet, I'm sure my image would have been entirely different and much more appealing. Poets live in another world, somewhere far above ours. It doesn't matter what truth or falsehood there is in their music and the dreams that they spin from their imagination. The experience of reading a poem, no matter how difficult it may be to understand, brings us closer to a world that is inaccessible to our ordinary sense organs; it brings us closer to the path travelled by the sages of old in their ascent to a divine world that is beyond our understanding. But the story-teller Ganesh is not so fortunate; he writes prose, where there are no dreams, no music. Worthless stories. Lies. Even if it is fun to hear a story now and then. Even though he thinks that it's probably true that a novel is nothing but a long story, Ganesh still can't help wondering if as a "novelist" he wouldn't have commanded more respect. After all, you can't really compare a short story, which comes and goes, like a flash in the pan, something you read while you're yawning and about to fall asleep or while you're sitting on the toilet seat, with a novel that continues to hold your attention day after day. There are even times when he tries to console himself with the thought that there must be something special to the phrase "Ganesh, the story-teller" that people like; that's the real reason why they've never been able to drop the title!

Whatever the case, all of this had been a source of sorrow to the middle-aged Ganesh; it was only with the greatest determination that he had finally managed to overcome the pain it caused him. He was now an old man. He .had written still more stories, suppressing the creative urge' to write poetry or anything else. He had come to accept that he needn't be distressed about the trademark, "story-teller". After all, even if there were lots of Yadu Mishras or his relatives, by now he also had an ample and appreciative circle of readers who praised his stories. They said that his stories were different from popular stories; they were more literary. There was poetry in them and dreams, real thinking and philosophy, even if the philosophical part was a bit idiosyncratic. Ganesh didn't care any more about what Yadu Mishra and his ilk said. It was enough for him that there were a few intelligent readers

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out there who recognised that his stories were not ordinary and knew how to appreciate their value. Besides, having grey hair had its merits; it added an aura of respect. These days he wasn't simply "the story-teller Ganesh; he'd become "the veteran story teller Ganesh'" or the "eminent story-teller Ganesh." What was even more important was his new sense of self-confidence. Now when he stood on stage to launch some book or open some convention (these days he was no longer called upon to take part in discussions in any literary seminars or workshops; he was clearly beyond such menial duties), and a gentle smile spread across his lips, the people in the audience thought that behind that smile lay the benign and bemused self of a writer. But what the veteran story-teller really wanted to tell them was this:

> Although it was true that he was still writing, he'd actually run out of things to say. I've spread out before you this variegated world with all its beauty and blemishes. I've tried to make you see it as I've seen it. Now it's up to you to go on and see how far you can understand what it is that I've shown you. If you can't understand it, it's your fault.

Story-teller Ganesh nonetheless kept right on writing, day after day, even at the age of seventy-two. Stories and more stories, as if there was no resisting some God-given inspiration. He was firmly convinced that the editors of literary magazines would not only publish whatever he wrote; they would also give his stories the position of honour on the first page of their journals. They'd even include in their short story sections his occasional discursive pieces and essays. He imagined the veteran story-teller Ganesh winking at his editors from their pages, saying, "And what do you think these are? Why, they're stories in disguise." Even the incoherent babbling of the Lord Brahma is taken for sacred scripture!

Thirty-two collections of stories were complete; it was time for the thirty-third. The thirty-second collection was still lying unpublished. The publisher explained that he hadn't finished publishing the school textbooks yet; every day there was a new demand from the government that he couldn't put off. But he promised, " I give you my word, sir." The veteran story teller didn't lose hope that this time he would keep his promise. And he went right on working on his thirty-third collection.

Then came the day that Ganesh decided that he had already written eight stories for the thirty-third collection; the next story would be the last. Enough was' enough.

At first all he wanted to say was, this will be the last story for my

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thirty-third volume. Then I'll hand over the volume with the nine stories to the publisher and let him publish it whenever he's ready. And take a break from writing stories for a while. But as he said those two words, "last story" to himself, and even once or twice let them escape his lips, albeit inaudibly, he began to feel in them a special power, as if he really meant, this will be my last, my very last story. The thirty-third collection will be the conclusion to my story-writing, which has been like an arduous religious vow that I have practised all my life. With these thirty-three collections I will have made an offering to the thirty-three crores of our gods and goddesses. I might even write something more, but it won't matter. This will be my last stick of incense that I offer to the gods. My last homage. In that last story the veteran story teller will finally reveal himself completely to his honorable readers, laying before them his final thoughts as a story-teller. My stopping writing doesn't mean that I've simply had enough. It just seems to me that this is the time for me to write my last story, I mean, to tell people my ultimate conclusions about the nature of life. And my last words will glisten forever like a drop of water on the forehead of Time. Forgive me if this seems arrogant; I apologize for what must seem like an unseasonable burst of poetry, but I honestly do mean something like that.

He probably would not have been able to explain just how this passionate desire to write his last story took hold of him. One could of course infer that it must have had something to do with the time and the place. The veteran story-teller had reached a certain age and was now staying in a certain place, in the house of his daughter at Juhu Beach on the Arabian Sea. From the moment he woke up to the moment he fell asleep he could see that splendid scenery from the window, how wave after wave would come rushing in and then roll back, some vanishing forever into the sands on the shore. Day after day he couldn't help but hear the sounds of their return, the sounds of their surrender.

The lofty waves, their challenge, their attack, their roar, their falling onto the ground, their surrender, their ultimate capitulation. That was what he would watch until his eyes gently closed. And with it there were always the sounds. Together the sight and sounds of the waves must have produced a heightened emotional state in his mind. He sat often with his eyes closed and when he opened them he felt compelled to ask himself, couldn't you be like those waves and surrender yourself, offering up the last words you have to say in your last piece of writing? It's time for that. Surrendering doesn't only mean defeat. It has another side: completion, fulfillment.

Although he would probably not have been conscious of the process, he must have sensed something like this within himself, the pull of a unique realization, an invitation extended to him by his mature age and this special

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setting. And so it was that he made up his mind that he would write his last story here, ever grateful for all the gifts that the Muses had so kindly bestowed upon him until now.

The decision was made. But what was he to write the story about? This question had him stumped for several days. This story had to be the crowning achievement of a story–writing career that had lasted almost fifty years; it had to encompass all of his stories. That is, it had to be something different. It had to be different because somehow it had to contain the essence of them all. With this story he somehow had to express his last thoughts in a way that drew together all of the visions of life that he had painted in all of his previous stories; the points that he had made there, the questions he had asked and answered, the doubts and the admonitions, even the insults, they somehow all had to be represented in this final story. This story had to make known the purpose of life, in one simple word. For example:

> Love. All love, any love is the foundation of all life, no matter what role the body, mind, heart, or soul plays in it.

Violence. The means to happiness are limited, but the would- be-takers are many. You cannot allow some smart aleck to abscond with all the goodies, leaving you dumbfounded and empty-handed. You have to fight to get in there before the others. And curiously, the closer you are to someone, the greater the need you feel to surpass them. But don't they feel the same need? And so you fight. It's not a struggle between insiders and outsiders; this is a struggle between members of the same intimate circle. And how can you fight without violence?

Suffering. Every word of what the Buddha said is true. Life is suffering. The loud cries of the newborn baby are its clarion call, even though we deliberately choose to ignore it in our scramble to find happiness. But the suffering finds us nonetheless, inevitably.

Self-sacrifice. Altruism is the greatest act of selfishness and therefore the one that comes most naturally to man. The ultimate end of what you call violence is not murder, it's your own death. The pleasure one feels in torturing one's self for the sake of another (whether that other is your own child or friend or some abstraction like "the nation") is what keeps this world going.

Falsehood. Everything is false, everything is an illusion. This life is just a tiny speck in a vast ocean of eternity. Why trouble yourself about it? An intelligent person should renounce the world and become a monk, if he

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believes in a higher reality. And if he doesn't, he should party until he can party no more, whatever the consequences.

Absurdity. This is even more false, more meaningless than falsehood itself. There's some core to falsehood; here there is nothing. Two and two will never make four. It makes no difference if you become a monk or go on partying. Nothing matters. Whether you suffer or are happy has nothing to do with anything you may have once done yourself, nor with any conscious decisions you may have made. There's simply no rhyme or reason to any of it.

Ganesh thought long and hard. He thought more and more, as he watched the waves roll in. But the waves couldn't help him reach a definite decision. He asked them, " I know that your rise and fall are not defeat. The last moment when you surrender yourself, that is your final statement; in that is all the wisdom that you have gathered in your lifetime. That is the ultimate fulfillment of your destiny. But, my friends, tell me, what is it exactly? All of the things one might say about life, from love to absurdity, the things I've shown in my stories in all their many strange manifestations, which one of them is worthy of my last story? Or perhaps it is all of them? Perhaps none? Perhaps something I've not even discovered yet? Tell me, what is it that the last words should proclaim, what is their majesty? Tell me!

As the waves continued to swell, break up, roar and eventually retreat back into the sea, Ganesh had to admit that they could tell him nothing, give him no sign of what it was that he should say as his last words. Indeed, they seemed to be running away from him. If I were to tell them, this is your final say on a life of suffering, then, banging your head on the ground in sorrow and crying out loud, they would say, yes, yes, that's it. And if I were to say, all your life you've danced and frolicked and now you just want to rest your head in the lap of the earth, as if in the lap of your mother or your lover, they'd say, yes, Ganesh, that's right, that's exactly right. And if I were to challenge them, saying, your endless and boring rise and fall means only this—that this is the 'way life is; there's life and death, sorrow and happiness, love and jealousy, through countless cycles of birth and death that come and go without end. This is the absurd play of creation, there's no rhyme or reason to it. No doubt then, too, they would say, Thank you Mr. Philosopher. You got it just right'. But what can be done about it, tell us?

Ganesh was discouraged. He was angry at the waves. It was you who encouraged me to write my last story and now you won't help. They say that all of you, and that includes the mountains, the ocean, the sky and all the rest, carry a message from the infinite. That was why I thought I could

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get some hint from you of the one eternal, universal truth. Was I wrong, then?

Ganesh began to cry. Really, his state was something to cry over, for by now he was afraid that he would never be able to write his last story. In other words, he had become an old man; his hair was grey and his teeth were falling out; he had said all along that in his many years he'd seen much of life, and now it turned out that he hadn't really been up to the task. He only seemed to see life; in fact he'd never really seen it. Ganesh the story teller was a fake. Period.

Ganesh decided that the ocean at Juhu Beach wasn't a proper ocean; that was why it couldn't help him. It's not like the Bay of Bengal, where our holy city Puri is. Look at these chaotic waves. And is this a shore line? It's a pathetic excuse for a shore, the lap of the earth, where a proud and violent yet alluring truth is supposed to hide. There's just the barest line of shore; when the tide comes in the waves come up as far as the mansions of the rich and the apartment houses and the gardens of the bungalows; then they retreat, abandoning the shore and leaving behind all kinds of junk and garbage, pieces of red and blue plastic. They call this a shore?. It's hard to believe people would come here to find pleasure, as if they'd made an important date with something called Pleasure that they just wouldn't miss. They laugh, they stride purposefully across the beach, they give their children balloons to hold, they even make love here, I mean, they seem to engage in those private little conversations so natural to lovers. But how could I have expected that an ocean and a beach that could never even remotely be called beautiful would have the power to tell me the ultimate meaning of life? But even this reproach didn't get him too far. The writer Ganesh was smart enough to know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Nature is Nature, no matter how you may judge her. Really, it's unworthy of you, Ganesh, to think that you will get the subject matter for your last story from the blue waves and the shore of Puri's ocean, when you cannot get it from the ocean at Juhu. You do yourself little credit, Ganesh, and you underestimate Nature as well. Admit it, Ganesh, you just can't do it. Story-teller Ganesh still has some growing up to do Either that or he's got writer's block. Either way, it just won't work.

But the famous story-teller Ganesh Mohanty just couldn't fail. If he's decided that he's going to write a story that can justifiably be called his last story, well then, he's going to write it. This may not be a very nice beach, but it is a beach nonetheless and a beach of a very respectable ocean! He can do it. If all of these people have come here determined to find pleasure, as if they'd made an important date with something called Pleasure that they just wouldn't miss, and they all go home, smiling contentedly, well then, 'why

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not Ganesh, too? This experienced and venerable writer also' has an appointment—with the final statement of his creative output. There was no question that there could be anything that might keep him from this appointment, not after a lifetime of experience as a writer. That just couldn't happen! Having repeated this promise to himself, Ganesh decided he would go outside and sit somewhere on the beach. Whatever, it's still the best place for my last story. I may not have gotten anything from the waves, but they're really nothing to me. Their shadowy forms and lingering salt smell won't summon any intimate memories to mar my last story...He took his time to choose a place that was cleaner than the rest of the beach, secluded, and he thought, suitable for his purpose.

He announced to his daughter and son-in-law, his grandchildren and his wife Sumati, who had come with him, that he was going to sit by the ocean to write a particularly important story, a story that he couldn't write sitting in the house. Sumati chided him, "Are you afraid you might make a mistake and put one of us into your story?" Ganesh tried to make light of the suggestion. "That's not it. Well... Of course you all peek your heads into my various stories, not just you, but lots of other people I know. But this is going to be a different kind of story; I don't think it will carry the stamp of any single character. I want this story to have the whole of my life's long experience in it; its characters will/be composites of everything, without any particular individuality. I'm sorry, I can't seem to explain exactly what it is that I mean..."

It goes without saying that none of it made any sense to Sumati, but she was impressed by her story-teller of a husband's determination and so she forgave him. Her daughter and grandchildren (particularly her playful grand-daughter Mita) didn't say a word. As if to reassure them Ganesh said, " I'll be right over there. You'll be able to see me. Don't worry; I won't be that close to the water's edge. Do you see that stand of palm trees behind Mohanlal Desai's bungalow? (An infamous millionaire by that name, once power-broker to many a famous politician, was now in prison for embezzlement; he seemed to have some connection with the bungalow in question). I'm going to sit right under those trees and watch the waves. All sorts of people will walk by in the distance, chatting; they'll pretend not to notice me and I'll pretend not to hear what they say. But the beach will be there for me; I mean, my being there on the beach will help me tremendously with what it is that I have to do.

"It's a totally secluded place. I can sit there and write my la—(he was about to say last) very important story. I won't even have to write it; it will write itself!"

Sitting there in his chosen place, he felt emboldened to tell the waves,

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"Listen, I've given up any hope of getting the subject matter for my last story from you, so that it doesn't matter anymore what nonsense you have to tell me. Never mind. I'm glad. That way I can say that the subject matter for my last story came from within me; I didn't have to ask anyone for it, whether that someone else was a messenger from Nature or some person that I know. I'll just summon up the three-hundred-and fifty-one characters of my stories, that is, the ones I still remember. After all, I'm their beloved and respected father, aren't I? Won't they help me now in my old age? They will. Of course they will.

But you waves, you are my witness. I want to give you that honour, at least in your capacity as a symbol of the natural world. What do you say?

And with that, he concentrated his attention on the characters that he had given birth to, nurtured, and raised to adulthood. He closed his eyes and remembered. And then he changed his mind. I won't call them; let them come by themselves. If I call them, some might come right away; some might take their time; and some of them, many of them in fact, might ignore me altogether and stay away. But that wouldn't be any reason for me to favour some above the others.

Ganesh soon saw that the characters who came unbidden were those who peopled his more successful stories. They were the ones from the stories that had been translated into other languages; the stories about which the critics had written and the editors had fought with each other to include in the collections they were publishing. But does that make them more worthy than the others to hear my last story? Ganesh was unprepared to admit this. I've written plenty of stories, about the intricate and marvellous ways of the human mind; my readers, accustomed as they are to television and movies, just didn't understand them. That was why they never became particularly popular.

In this course of his ruminations, Ganesh recalled several of his stories, successful or unsuccessful, which he considered to be representative of his philosophy of life in its many different perspectives. .... Why don't I take a character from one of those and enthrone him in my last story? Would that be singling out for favour one among my many children? Some might say yes, but what else can I do? In the end do I have to say that one of them was more important, more true than all the others?

Take the case of the story in which my characters were looking for pleasure, just like the people who come to the beach here, although perhaps a bit more frantically. They're a father and son and they run into each other in one of those vulgar nightclubs with sex shows. They're embarrassed to

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see each other. Now isn't this a fine example of the Buddha's words that all of life is inevitably suffering?

Or this one. There are two characters living a lonely life in the capital. They decide that they should fall in love with each other and end up locked in each other's embrace at the time of the Festival of Lights, although each of them is quite sure from past experience that what they feel for each other is not really love. But they do get the message that they need love, whatever love might be. That shows: the primacy of love, doesn't it?

Here's another one. A middle-aged man decides that he needs to display some courage. He decides that he will publicly acknowledge the loves of his life, even to his wife, should the occasion arise. As part of his new boldness he goes and places flowers on the grave of someone he had once loved (a love he'd never avowed and of course never consummated) only to see a cow eat them all up, down to the very last petal. The point: All the love a person has experienced in his lifetime, no matter what form that love may take, is destined to end up in the mouth of some cow, call it Father time or whatever you want to call it. See what an illusion, what an absurd illusion this brief life is! If I were to use this character as the protagonist of my last story, that wouldn't be bad, would it?

Or maybe I shouldn't use any of these odd characters. What about society? I've written so many stories about the injustices in society and how we knowingly or unwittingly try to detach ourselves from them and absolve ourselves of any responsibilities for them.

But what's the use of going through all that? I've so many fine stories to my credit, one better than the other, that could be made to express one of life's many truths. But which one of those truths is the most important? Which character should I use to write my last story? Shall that final truth be Love? Suffering? Illusion? Something altogether different?

I won't admit defeat. I never admit defeat. I have an appointment with my last story. Ganesh was adamant. He was determined to take some character from one of his stories for his last story. To fail would be to admit that the old man was a has-been, nothing more than a teller of silly tales. See now, in the end, didn't one have to say something profound about life, fathom its secrets? Not to be able to use one of his characters was to confess that not one of them was really dependable. You just couldn't trust what they might say. Isn't that the case, Ganesh?

Ganesh gave a resounding "No!" in answer to this last question, although one suspected that he wasn't entirely convinced. And then a few minutes later he was sad to admit that it was true. It wasn't exactly the case that his characters were unreliable or that what they said was superficial. It was just that there was something after the climax of a story; there was

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something that lingered, and one couldn't help feeling that the message a story relayed was not the last word. Go back to the father and the son who run into each other in the nightclub. They realize how pathetic, how ludicrous their quest for pleasure is. But at the same time, doesn't that make them also realize that this time they should both do something to find a happiness that is meaningful and is in no way laughable? And the two lovers who are forced into each other's arms on the Festival of Lights, couldn't it be that their need for love is so intense that they will come truly to love each other? Similarly, our cowardly protagonist who put the flowers on the grave, didn't he walk out of the cemetery with a smile on his face, as if he'd discovered something entirely unexpected? That this strange thing called love is still something that we two, husband and wife, can share, and that being so, if life is an illusion, it's still not to be so easily dismissed?

It's true. None of my characters ever said the last word. But it's not their fault. I wouldn't let them. With an artist's sleight of hand or a touch of irony, I kept them ignorant of that last word, that final truth, that I didn't dare divulge.

Then? What's next, Ganesh? Now Ganesh you're on your own. You have to stand on your own two feet, don't you? No messenger from Nature, like these waves here, will help you. And the characters in your stories are like puppets that you've made; you never gave them their full autonomy. You were always there; you somehow just couldn't make yourself disappear. It's as if your own doubts and uncertainties, one could even say your own all-too-clever sense that some secret was lurking, kept them in check. And now it's up to you. You're all on your own. Forget about what your characters thought. And forget this foolish desire to set before the feet of the world some universal truth that will meet with one hundred percent acclaim and that will glisten forever, if not on the forehead of Time, at least on the page of the history of Oriya literature. And if you still want to write your last story, to dazzle us with some final last words, well then, you've no one but yourself to help you, nothing but your own experience to teach you. The son Ganesh, the lover Ganesh, the husband Ganesh, the father Ganesh. Haven't you been all of these things, Ganesh Mohanty, done all these things, experienced all that life has to offer of these things? Then use all those experiences and say it, say what you want to say as your last words. Don't you realize that your characters may be a reflection of you but that they aren't really you? You fashioned these striking images out of bits and pieces of your experience, using the power of your imagination to give form to the merely possible; and in the end you suppressed them, not letting them say some final word. Well, now you have to speak for yourself; however fragmentary your own experience, what comes from it must be true for

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you. That should be your last word, even if it isn't equally true for all people. Say it; out of your own experience say which of these you think is the most important: love, violence, suffering, or falsehood. And let that be your legacy. The moment of death is no time for telling stories; it's the time for the raw truth, the kind of truth that poets sometimes express in their words.

I will, I will say it. Ganesh's words rang out like the joyous affirmation of some ancient sage at the moment of his Enlightenment: That am I (I am this great and wondrous thing). You cannot say that I am just a human being the way that you can say that this is the ocean with its waves, or this is a tree, or this is a raven. Each human being is Existence, one without a second, independent of all other things; such an Existence cannot be exhaustively described in finite categories the way one might describe Nature or other living creatures. And so, of course, Ganesh could offer the world his final words, on the strength of his many unique and idiosyncratic experiences in life.

So Ganesh thought and thought, but he was still no closer. In the end can I say, then, that love is the most important of all things? Is there something in my own experience of love that would let me say that? Before I was married I had a few childish infatuations that now just make me laugh. Of course once I got married I loved my wife, with a romantic love and a sexy love, even an angry love and from time to time with a love so deep that it came close to the self-surrender of a mystical experience. I even had a few extra-marital affairs and enjoyed the spice they provided, although I never considered them very important and relegated them to a very minor place in my life. Could I dissect all these experiences of love and say that this was the real nature of love as I've experienced it in my life? Could I say that love was the most important experience of my life and that through it one can come to know the final meaning of life, its ultimate truth?

It's the same with everything else in my life. From time to time I did think that life was suffering. At other times I thought that the meaning of life lay in the promise of pleasure; suffering was nothing more than an unavoidable "negative" that one had to get through in order to savour pleasure all the more. Violence? Well, I may have been jealous of some competitor in his success, but did I ever knowingly wish another person harm? On the whole I've been a decent sort. Altruism? Of course I've a spirit of generosity. I've been particularly generous to my children. Still, I wouldn't want to lie and say I'd give my life for them. As for the experience of life as false and absurd, it's true that there have been times when I've thought that there is no meaning to life. But then, I've done a few absurd things in my life, too, and found pleasure in doing them. That leaves social consciousness. I have that of course, though only to a certain point, which

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isn't really all that unusual. That is to say, I wouldn't want to give myself over to it completely at the expense of all of life's other experiences, but who would?

I guess I would have to say that I have experienced everything, I mean, all of human emotions (on the basis of which I created my characters), though I've experienced each one only to a limited extent and often in conflict with other feelings. And so I could never single any one of them out as the sole vehicle to express my final thoughts. Whatever else he is, Ganesh Mohanty is no liar.

I can't do it. Ganesh, who had always considered himself an honest man, was forced to admit that he couldn't do it. But the curious thing was that he didn't fall apart with this seemingly catastrophic defeat. He didn't give up in despair and tear up the piece of paper he was holding in his hand. A strange thought came into his mind, that was close to the sage's "That am I", or at least its forerunner. My life's experience may not have been anything special and may have been a jumble of different adventures, and so its final summation may be a bit disconnected and incoherent, but really, is that my fault?

Isn't my life really just one of God's stories? Aren't I just a character in a story God tells?

And not just me, isn't everyone on earth the same? That explains why each one of us is uniquely ourselves. What we do, what we are, and our fragmentary partial final truths, everything about us is different. Different and exotic and alluring, with our infinite mixtures of infinite thoughts and feelings. But can we really be characters in His stories? What do you take Him for?

Ganesh smiled to himself. That was when he discovered the two people, a man and a woman coming toward him, as if they had an appointment with him. They were smiling, too. Not shy, timid smiles, but bold, exuberant smiles. What was this all about?

It was noon. The waves kept up their familiar game, although by now the beach was practically deserted. That made the presence of the two people seem even more curious. It was as if they were about to stage a performance that the whole world was waiting silently to watch. Astonished, Ganesh stared at the couple. He was even more surprised to see that they didn't seem to mind. They kept on laughing and even said a few words to each other as they looked into each other's eyes.

They came closer. They were a young couple, and judging from the way they were dressed, not very well off. Perhaps they had decided to come to Juhu Beach today to sit under these palm trees, as if to keep some promise they'd once made to each other. There they were now, laughing. Ganesh

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couldn't take his eyes off them. Now they were kissing, not just' one kiss, but two, and three. Who knows how many. Their hands couldn't wait to find each other's bodies. It was as if this was no ordinary stand of palm trees; it was the romantic bower of Lord Krishna and his lovers, the wives of the cowherds in Vraj. And now Krishna had come to his love nest with his paramour. For a very important appointment. But not with you, sir, not with you. Then why do you keep looking at us like that, as if you've never seen anything like this before? What are you looking at? What are you thinking?

At first Ganesh considered moving so that they could be alone and enjoy their love-making undisturbed. And then he laughed at his own prudishness. I don't have to run away. What else are they going to do? How far can they go out here in the bright midday sun? He even began to feel a tinge of anger at the thought that they didn't seem to care about his being there. Was he so old that he was like some inanimate object in the background and they could just do whatever they wanted right in front of him?

Ganesh didn't move. Suddenly he let out a loud laugh, not out of contempt nor out of disgust. This was a laugh of the joy of discovery. Eureka! I found it! I found it!

Do you see, I'm going to write a story about you! About your passionate, ardent love. I've no idea how the story will end. Maybe in a blaze of passion; maybe in noble suffering or maybe in just everyday ordinary pain as the heat of desire grows cool. Or maybe with fate's loud guffaw at its own cruel joke. The ceaseless rise and fall of the chaotic ocean waves, this seedy beach-front, this deserted afternoon,, this stand of palm trees adorning the bungalow of that master-thief Mohanlal, could there be a less suitable setting for your urgent love? And a better one for a superb story! Don't worry; in the end I'll be compassionate and wish you well. I'll give you my blessings.

How could I ever have thought I'm just a character in one of God's stories? Why, I'm God myself! Isn't that what a good story teller is, an all-powerful, all-compassionate Father? And if it's natural for every human being to want to take hold of some godly attribute and nurture it within himself, then why shouldn't the story-teller Ganesh think of himself as some sort of God? Why should it be so odd for him to give his blessings to some less fortunate creatures?

But Ganesh, is this going to be your last story? Ganesh dismissed the question with a laugh. Are you crazy? Can God ever write his last story? Impossible. His story-telling can never end with all of its beloved characters, each one unique. This wonderful creation will never end. That's why mine won't end, either. Even after I'm dead and gone, my pen will keep going, in heaven, in hell, or wherever I am in my next birth.

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He was late for lunch and had to endure the gentle reproaches of his family, particularly his wife Sumati. " Were you so absorbed in watching those two lovers that you forgot all about eating and drinking? I saw from the window how you were gaping at them. Or did you decide to write a story about them, your all important great story?"

There was no one else in the room. And so Ganesh laughed and gave his wife's cheek a gentle pinch, the way he'd often done in the past when they were young lovers. "Exactly."

I've never told a lie. Ganesh was proud of his honesty. So what if it's not my last story. It will still be a very important story for me. And so it should be!

Translated from Oriya by K.K. Mahapatra

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Time to Say Our Few Words

Sitakant Mahapatra

We are living and writing at a time which is perhaps more complex, more overburdened and more demanding than any period in human history. Long before God was declared dead, but we humans have continued, had to continue, not too well and often sick.

They were luckier, those people who at their time listened to Jesus and acted as per his bidding.

"Follow me," said Jesus, "No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Christ's disciples left their nets, their boats, their homes and families and followed him. For he had said "take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

But today we all – more so creative writers – ask anxiously where shall we go, whom should we follow, when we leave our nets and what do we convey through our incompetent words to others, our readers. And above all, is there a kingdom of the dead God or the minor gods?

As a writer I have been plagued by this self-doubt: perhaps we are destined not to leave our nets; not to follow anyone other than our soul, and its mystery and on the other hand to be entangled, intertwined in the nets of the world, the *Samsar,* and at the most seek liberation in and through it. In short it is a dialectic between the soul and the *Samsar*, between mystery and our Over-arching Cognitive Pride. I am aware that we live in an age which distrusts *mystery* and is never kind to any talk regarding the *soul.* But for me both are realities, perhaps more real than all the products of cognition and sense-perception. They are something for which and at whose call, a Beethoven, a Van Gogh, a Mandelstam and a Kabir have staked their lives.

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Then comes the realization how fleeting human life is. And still more astonishing that a tree, a star, the gods all who are also fleeting seem very much to require us for their reality. And not merely that. They do concern us, disturb us and impart new meanings and new realizations to our understanding of the world. It would thus seem to be a marriage of fleetingness and we, the most fleeting, have to gratefully remember how they have given us the awareness of life and its meaning. Impermanence is our common fate. Perhaps it is as well. But it does spring from the realization, as Whitman says, "each of us inevitable, each of us limitless and each of us here as divine, as any is here."

And I feel as I have advanced in years, I seem to remember more. Perhaps life is always lived forward and understood backward. This understanding for me is slow and halting. I feel what I assumed as simple in earlier years now appear to be really very complex; what I thought, I understood very clearly now; it seems I understand the same thing less clearly and, what is worse, not unoften, I don't seem to understand. Finding a metaphor for the incomprehensible and a word for the wordless inexplicable is after all extremely clumsy. Sometimes I do feel like a poor uncle Podger hanging a picture. Only I happen to be a poor wordsmith.

But memory is also a part of realization, an aid to growth and expansion of consciousness, an expanding circle which draws in remembrances into a crucible and makes bigger and bigger whole. To me memory is art's alternative to history. I do believe in our historical destiny but have often chosen to be more concerned about the fleeting moment. If collective memory is important no less significant is my memory or your memory and I do consider it as more important than "history" which often degenerates into a plaything of learned historians.

The space for poetry and literature and for that matter, all creative arts, has, no doubt, shrunk today. Other forces, other challenges have occupied the space earlier available to the creative arts parallel to it and as a result the poet, the creative writer have got marginalized. Is it a loss for the writers and for the community or a gain? But I for one feel it had to happen, this marginalisation, and it is perhaps welcome. It can insulate the writer from rat races and simultaneously awaken a deep sense of his dignity and his true commitment to society, to console and stand by his fellowmen. Maybe out of this silence and a true aloneness which is very different from loneliness a deep love for life and fellowmen emerges. For, a genuine rebel is one who can say no and walk away without laying any claim to martyrdom. I believe in Octavio Paz's words: "The writer should be a sniper, he should endure solitude, he should know himself to be a marginalized being. It is

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both a curse and a blessing that writers are marginal." But marginalisation should not result in or be equivalent to, unconcern for our fellowmen for they explain and constitute a part of our being.

As regards language in my writing I have always assigned a very careful place to it. Language to me is thought, is experience. In the connectivity of thought, language and experience, object and image occupy a seminal place. The three are inseparable. It is much more than an instrument of communication, it is an instrument for ordering of experience, of comprehending reality. I have inherited the spoken words/images of my village and its neighbourhood where I spent the first 15 years of my life till I matriculated and came to Ravenshaw College. Upto that time I left my village only twice for any long distance – once to Puri for Rathyatra with relatives and second time for my matriculation examination. The other visits from the village were only to houses of relatives or important deities etc. My village was nearly inaccessible in Mahanadi's flood plains but I always remember with gratitude the wonderfully expressive words, phrases, symbols these illiterate villagers taught me. Thought follows language and whatever else I learnt of poetry, imagery, symbolism, new vision of reality, concepts etc etc remained only as accretions on this very solid substratum. At the most I tried to see when I came to read them – Neruda, Paz, Borges, Yannis Ritsos. Eliot, Rilke, to name only a few – where they related to and spoke to me in terms of experience, imagery, way of apprehending reality and above all use of language as a mechanism of dredging the psyche.

Can one ever make language say what one wants to say and what it has perhaps not said before? I don't know. I only know it has been for me a silent struggle that seems never-ending. I feel this is perhaps a common destiny of all sensitive writers. Sometimes I have treated language as my intimate enemy to be engaged in a duel. Some other time as a worshipful carpenter before the timber to carve an idol.

Then came the realization that poetic activity is done only in the deep loneliness of one's being. Not that the poet cuts himself away from history or contemporaneity but after internalizing the agony of his times he is another *persona* as he creates. That loneliness which submerges him is nearly unendurable in his heart but it is what scatters the stars and the moon in the sky and lights lamps in darkness. With it goes the further realization that no one will ever tell us of our fate but once having been on this planet the story of our being here cannot be erased. I attempted to express this feeling in a poem "The Other View: Yashoda's Soliloquy." It was not a story retold but a way of realizing human destiny: a strange realization, an experience, to which you cannot call a witness and the burden

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of seeing it alone. An experience that will never leave your chest till your last breath*.

In one sense, I have always felt poetry's efficacy is almost nil. Have we ever known when a lyric stopped carpet-bombing of Vietnam or a poem on moonrise stopped a tank at Tiananmen? Gandhiji in his letter to Rabindranath had said, "I cannot console the hungry with a song from Kabir."

And yet in another view its strength is immeasurable. It is like Jesus's writing in sand recorded in Chapter 8 of St. John's Gospel. Seamus Heaney quotes it in *extenso*. Once the pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who, they said, was caught red-handed in an act of adultery. To provoke Jesus they said: "Moses had ordained that such people should be stoned to death. What sayeth thou?" Jesus kept silent with his head bent and scribbling something on the sand. After they repeated the question twice, thrice, he raised his head and said "He among you who has never sinned let him be the first to throw a stone at her." So saying he went on scribbling as before.

Sometime passed. When he raised his head he saw only the woman standing and nobody around. He asked of the woman, "Did anyone throw a stone at you?" And she replied, "No my Lord." Jesus said, "I also forgive you, go back and sin no more."

Is it not a telling allegory for the efficacy of words how, seemingly, powerless, they can transform lives and therefore the world; how they can make us see life again with a new pair of eyes? And what was the meaning of Jesus's scribbling in silence? It was a silent writing on sand that leaves the accusers and the accused wordless even as it leads to a renewal of their beings.

I will like to end this personal note on how and why after all I have continued dabbling in something exotic like poetry with a quote each from two Greek poets Seferis and Ritso, both my favourites.

> "I want no more than to speak simply;
> to be granted this grace,
> because we have burdened song with so much music

---

* Yashoda heard the complaint from *gopis* that the child Krishna had swallowed some earth. Asked to open his mouth Yashoda saw no sign of earth but the whirling stars and planets. When she spoke of this with *gopis*, their response naturally was that Yashoda had gone mad. They looked in afresh, to insist that there was only a bit of earth stealthily swallowed. Ultimately Yashoda was left with, that nagging question and self-doubt. "Did I really see what I saw?" This other view is a valid and important vision of the creative writer. Perhaps he is creative for this very reason.

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that it is gradually sinking
and we have adorned our art so much
that its features have been eaten away by gold
and it is time to say our few words
because tomorrow the soul sets sail"
– Seferis: An Old Man on River Bank Cairo 20th June 42

Yes it is time, high time.

And Ritso in his enviable words: "then it came about my friend that we learnt talking together, quietly and simply. We understand each other now and tomorrow I say we will be simpler still. We will find the words that carry the same weight in all hearts and the lips of all so that we may express what we feel and people will smile at us and say 'such poems we ourselves can make a hundred an hour'. Good, we wish it so because we do not sing to separate ourselves from the world, my friend, to unite it we sing."

Yes to unite us with the world, we must sing. Sing for all its plenitude, its sun-laden promises, its dark reality, its occasional episodes of terror that may benumb the imagination and make poetry retreat faced by the incomprehensible horror. And yet carry on with the hope that poetry's worldlessness will emerge as a phoenix with words in its beak.

❑

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Prayer as Poetry

A Comparative Study of Modern Hindi and Indian English Poetry

Akshaya Kumar

I

In both Hindi and Indian English streams of poetry the divine is invoked in several poems with different intentions and motives revealing a non-homogenous non-essentialized attitude of the poets. Experimenting with the traditional forms of religious verses that include hyms[1] and psalms[2] as well, these poets address God and other deities in their own highly subjective and even markedly eccentric ways creating a wide spectrum of responses towards the hitherto unquestioned divine. From acceptance to agnosticism, from agnosticism to playful subversion, from subversion to blunt denial of the divine—such is the range of this spectrum of responses. Despite this heterogeneity these responses form two visibly separate broad clusters or bands on the spectrum — one band corresponds to New Hindi poetry and another to modern Indian English poetry.

The protagonist of New Hindi poetry has no quarrels with the divine per se; but he definitely grudges his own status vis-a vis the divine. He does not prostrate himself before the gods with any sense of helplessness or defeatism. Unlike a traditional devotee, he does not cave in or surrender before the authority of the divine. A traditional devotee, according to *Srimad Bhagawata*, worships the divine through nine ways: (i) listening to stories of God's actions and descriptions of his greatness (sravana) (ii) singing hymns in his praise (kirtana), (iii) continuous remembrance of him (anusmarana), (iv) servitude (dasya); (v) companionship (sakhya) (vi) consecration of one's self to him (atmanivedana), (vii) worshipping his feet (pada-sevana); (viii) performing rituals to him (archana), (ix) prostration before him (vandana) (qtd. in Chari, 223). The non-submissive attitude however stops short of total defiance or absolute denial of the gods, for, in moments of distress

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and challenge, he invokes them for strength and inspiration. As an evolving individual, he does not want these presiding deities to simplify his urges to explore life. Rather he pleads for a tougher and harder destiny so that he may wage fiercer battle(s) against the odds of life. He does not pray for any of those divine boons which a traditional worshipper always looks for. To him, such fatalistic worshipping is counter-evolutionary.

II

Among New Hindi poets, the prayers of three poets – Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, Bhavani Prasad Mishra and Naresh Mehta – have been studied to form a viable indigenous and native critical reference to measure and calibrate the responses of three modern Indian English poets – Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra – towards the divine. Such a comparatist frame precludes the possibility of absolutizing or essentializing the position of the divine in Indian poetry as a whole. Also with its accent on difference and dissimilarity, not only the plurality of the discourse within Indianness becomes pronounced, the divergences within regional language literatures also come into play. The three poets from either of the streams do not form easily coherent or co-linear perspective.

To begin with, Sarveshwar's revolutionary persona does not want any divine intervention in human affairs for it entails not only a subordination vis-a-vis God, but also discourages all human endeavour. The frailty of human effort does not disturb his incorrigible faith in himself. The very act of pleading injures his merit. He would say '... it would be much appropriate to do away with the very term "prayer", thus overcoming that implicit state of mind. Instead of "prayer", something like "chorus" should be given currency' (*Gadya Rachanain*, 486). Quite repeatedly, he would pray for divine indifference thus:

> When did the odourless flower seek fragrance from you?
> When did the sharply pointed thorn seek tenderness?
> Whatever you have granted, is granted.
> Whatever now is, is mine.
> So you sleep, now I shall wake up through the painful night.
>
> No, no Lord from You
> never shall I seek power.
>
> (*Kavitain-II*, "Prarthana-1", 130)

This is not a denial of God's grace as such as it is an acceptance of human

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effort. The persona acknowledges God's all-important role of creating life around us, but he does not want Him to regulate the vagaries of human life in His own partial ways. The emphasis in Sarveshwar's prayers shift from God's presumed benevolence to the imperfect human endeavour. In the true spirit of an unfinished man the persona wants to chart out his-own destiny without any external heavenly help. The evolution is possible through self-experience culminating into self-denial:

> I shall earn that (power) by dying and dispersing
> If not today, tomorrow shall I overcome
> I shall rock the falling mountain
> Even if I am crushed, what is so shameful?
> Never shall I run for shelter
> No, no Lord from You
> never shall I seek power. (130)

This prayer is not so much a defiance of God, it is rather a defiance of the self itself. One who defies his self can defy all including the divine presence.

Sarveshwar's unorthodox persona does not pray for an easy accessibility of the soul. The possible failures of his uncompromising missions do not dampen his revolutionary convictions. The challenges of his extraordinary missions, it so seems, fire his ordinary human attributes to great heights. He therefore celebrates his weaknesses:

> Let your paths be inaccessible
> Let my feet be tired.
>
> Let failures there be in the journey every moment my friend
>
> Let my limitations befall on me only
> Let your sights be pleasant.
> Let my eyes be full oftears.
>
> ("Prarthana-2", 131)

This resolve to carry on the struggle even in the face of inherent human limitations bring in a rare element of heroism in Sarveshwar's persona. This heroism is not unmindful of the dangers involved in such self-exceeding missions. As such it cannot be identified with romantic heroism which is always oblivious of human weaknesses.

In his search for the eternal and the immortal, Sarveshwar's pesona is discouraged by his mortality:

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May I keep on walking, piling on my shoulders
My own courage till You melt this body
Let your creation be immortal
Let my choice be mortal
Let your paths be inaccessible
Let my feet be tired. (131)

In fact the persona is proud of his weaknesses. These imperfections only propel him forward into the dicey arena of life to explore the finished and accomplished truth life. Whereas in the traditional devotee, the consciousness of mortal weaknesses subordinates him to the divine Absolute, in the poet-persona the celebration of this consciousness paves way for his relational re-orientation with the divine.

In yet another prayer, the persona wants to undergo the severest trials and ordeals of life to realize personally its vicissitudes. Even in moments of despair and frustration, he would like the divine powers to stay away from the battlefield of life:

This is my only prayer to you God
whenever I am defeated, do not come.
("Prarthana-3", 133)

Such is the conviction of the persona that he is ready to withstand any divine fury or retribution gleefully. The displeasure of God does not deflate his pride in himself;

Throw me into the fire of hell
yet I'll live taking it as bliss of heaven.

The persona does not want to fall on anyone's feet to elicit any mundane benefit. He prays for suffering because 'Sorrow has very big eyes/What is that which is not contained in them/ This cosmos which fills you with pride/ is too small'(133). Ultimately he does not cherish an immortal life, he prays;

Grant me the age of a tear
Take away this imaginary cycle (kalpa chakra) (133)

III

Bhavani Prasad Mishra holds that traditional prayers are simply wisl ıl and unrealistic as in such prayers the complex problems are set aside in the hope

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that some divine grace would take care of them. Such fanciful praying is luxury. In his very informal yet not non-serious style he has his one-sided talk with the divine. In the title of the poem itself - "Ek Tarpha Baatchit Jeevan Ke Prabhu Se" (*Khooshboo Ke Shilalekh*, 67-101) the tone of challenge and human assertion is too conspicuous to be missed:

> Favouring the prayer
> always
> is almost going against life
> By immersing in the prayer, man
> wants to forget life
> at least the life
> he lives,
> in the hope of some imaginary life,
> he sinks his life.

Bhavani's dissatisfied ego-conscious protagonist does not approach God for an easy comfortable human destiny, for such a wish stems from an opportunist mind which tend to manipulate complex reality in its favour. The luxuries of love or happy marital life are to be forsaken for higher struggles:

> Straying under this canopy
> how can I
> tie my knot with peaceful mind?
> Till yesterday
> with a new unhealed wound
> I used to arrange
> my own pyre
> Love or marriage
> cannot be carried out here
> O Father!

Being aware of the higher challenges of life, the persona does not want to settle into any of those hackneyed and stereotyped formats of life that stagnate life and reduce his vision to that of a mere bread-seeker or bread-earner.

Bhavani's protagonist is not motivated by any self-preserving concerns. He prays not for life, but for its denial and dissolution:

> But today's night
> I have chosen not for a new life ,
> but for an old pending death.
> Have you anywhere

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heard this
totally willing acceptance of the reverse ?

Instead of seeking shelter in the familiar and familial confines of his house, he wants to free himself from any subterfuge like home or family; this, however, does not imply that he disrespects home or family. Only for the sake of socialist transformation does he want to unchain himself from the narrow binds of family:

But the fire is
now emanating
from the comers of my eyes
Nothing therein is to claim
only renunciation
Today my desire is
to break
my own well-made house!

The easy conveniences of life are no longer cherished. The inner urges of transcending the narrow personal comfort always exhort him to rise above the mundane and the transient. Rather he is ready to extend his struggle beyond the domain of life too:

More games there are
If needed
they too will be played
Miseries there could well be
Beyond life too
they too will be braved.

His prayers are directed not towards the mitigation of his miseries, rather they are appeals for greater miseries. Such is the self-defying intensity of his urges.

Bhavani's persona is not interested in playing hide and seek with life and death. He wants a head-on encounter with death without any camouflage:

Till now I was wrestling
with life and death.
Now life will sit on one side, alone
and I shall pounce upon death
Sometime though it might take
but with slight care
I shall accomplish that.

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This singular determination to overwhelm death is not a romantic fallacy because the awareness of the perils involved in such an enterprise is always at the back of his mind. Still he prefers a direct confrontation with death without any guile or trick: 'I am not only sick of the tricks/ I am ashamed of them too/and clearly/ I want to grapple death in clean game.' (74) In fact, in the vision of this protagonist 'prayer is an aspect of desiring death/ night it is/that has descended on some heated day' (98). But this night is not a product of some sadness or depression, rather 'it takes its birth from the acceptance of this world/ and harmony it has/ with the upheavals of the world/ that is with its serious businesses/ and games' (99). The very prospect of death does not benumb his zeal:

> Like Nachiketa
> I shall pose awkward questions
> to all those essences
> from my death-bed
> I shall see how Yama stops me
> Everything mine has decayed
> .....
> Blunt questions shall I ask
> holding tight all elements in my fist

Death is not evaded or postponed; rather it is invited with a deathless wish to live even beyond it.

IV

In the poetry of Naresh Mehta, prayer is not an exercise of escape. The poet-persona, very much like the earlier two personas, does not evade the painful realities of life; rather it is through suffering only that he seeks self-expansion. In one of his prayers entitled quite simply "Prarthana" (*Banpaakhi Suno!!*, 8) he does not invoke God, rather he addresses his heart, the abode of God thus:

> Bear it,
> O heart! Bear it,
> bear the pain!

A traditional devotee prays for the mitigation of pain. Mehta's persona owns the pain gleefully:

> It's a sprout
> of that in-born agony

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present in you,
like the fire of a bamboo-forest
your own offspring
love it, cover it with your shawl,
accept it,
O heart! Hear the pain.

Acceptance of pain is the first and foremost condition of growth. The prayer, before it illuminates, ignites the fire of pain in the persona. This awareness of pain is a boon—divine grace:

It is an all encompassing pain ,
Kalpa-tree-
take it as a boon, bow your head,
accept it

In a conceptual poem "Etihaas aur Prarthana", the persona places the challenges involved in this bowing in prayer higher than the challenges involved in bloody wars recorded in history:

Some day
you try to bow your forehead in prayer
[You will realize]
not only your loneliness
but also what it means to be out of line with contemporaneity.
Far more unwieldy than the blood-bath [of history]
is the fire coronation of the prayers. (*Utsava*, 82)

Prayer is an act of self-effacement and self-extinction. It is an appeal for renunciation and selflessness. Traditional devotee prays for some material possession and gain. In the exalted view of Mehta's persona:

This is the quality of a prayer—only that
it can give to anyone
even its selfhood
peeling it of
from its own body, like a tree-bark.
(*Utsava*, "Etihaas aur Prarthana", 82)

Obviously the prayers of such a persona transcend the mundane human interests. In fact the personas of the three Hindi poets pray for a difficult future, a challenging destiny unmediated, by any divine grace.

In yet another prayer, the poet-persona seeks strength from God for

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his evolutionary objective ideals. Unlike the traditional worshipper or the modern opportunistic devotee, Mehta's praying persona prays for larger social ends at the cost of his own life:

> In our tattered dress
> we shall fight along the age
> One day dawn would definitely
> break on the people.
> O God, I seek
> a song written by blood
> and sung by people
> (*Banpaakhi Suno*!!, "Prarthana", 29)

V

The praying-personas of the three New Hindi poets, though approach the divine with varying intensities, yet their approaches are not radically dissimilar in terms of the ideological impulse. Their prayers are not inspired by the prospect of some immediate material advantage. In fact they pray only to stay away from worldly pursuits. The radicalism of Sarveshwar's persona forecloses any possibility of his being submissive before the tyranny of the absolute; the stoicism of Bhavani's not-so-loud persona is also unflinching; the vedantic leanings of Mehta's persona go beyond the human, ruling out any opportunistic alliance on his part with the divine. If one seeks 'untrodden paths', the other is chasing the dark 'death'; still another opts for the impenetrable 'forests'; their prayers are therefore not appeals for divine benevolence or magnanimity.

VI

Viewed from the perspective of Hindi poetry, the protagonist of Indian English poetry offers his prayers with a discernibly distinct drive and conviction. His prayers do not soar to any of those epic heights that forebode a cataclysmic change in the human predicament. Unlike the protagonist of Hindi poetry, this protagonist does not aim to transcend death, nor does he aspire to attain the overwhelming impersonality of the forests. He prays without any of those cosmic or transcendental hangovers that lift the protagonist of Hindi poetry beyond the domain of the practical and the pragmatic. Foregrounded in western humanism and rationalism, his prayers are not fired by any passionate idealism or strong ideological defiance.

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Praying turns into an exercise of reasoning rather than a pledge to explore life along deserted lanes and retreating streets. Unlike his Hindi counter-part, he prays for the conservation and integration of his self rather than for its dissolution and annihilation.

Nissim Ezekiel's poems written in the form of hymns, psalms and prayers confirm the poet-persona's humanistic approach to life. In "Prayer I" he demands man to be the 'measure of mankind' (Ezekiel, 55) and in the "Prayer II" he wants to "dream the dream of Man" only (55). The emphasis clearly shifts from the divine to the human in such prayers implying a non-reverent (if not irreverent) attitude of the protagonist towards the transcendental signified. In yet another "Prayer", the tone is once again exceptionally unconventional and un-adoring. The traditional prayers unrealistically probe 'the way of dispossession' or 'To be alone, without desire, /Composed and consciously disposed/ towards the things unseen"; The poet-persona as a man of mortal concerns never aspires to attain such abstract ideals. To him these ideals are highly non-human always suggesting an escape from life. 'The fervour/ Of an erring choice' is much more important to him than the 'unredeemable' (101) indifference that these prayers suggest. "Morning Prayer" too does not soar very high. It ends with humanist preposition thus:

> Whatever the enigma,
> The passion of the blood,
> Grant me the metaphor
> To make it human good. (122)

A 'kind of subtle scepticism and incisive irony' (Shahane, 254) engenders complexity in Ezekiel's prayers. These prayers are nothing more than comic appeals aimed at humanizing the metaphysical.

The persona of "Latter-day Psalms" tries to reshape certain psalms (viz. 1,3,8,23,60,78,95,102 and 127) of *The Book of Psalms*—a constituent of The Old Testament in humanistic and modern terms. He finds nothing final, finished or exclusive in the holy psalms. "Without challenging God's glowing and providence, Ezekiel the poet-persona, has his say—sly, sure, sensible - in accordance with the spirit within him, moved by his experience of life as it is in his day" (Khullar, 221). Neither the ethical nor the metaphysical imperatives distract his attention from the immediate and the urgent existential requirements of life. He does not accept the holy idea that:

> Blessed is the man
> Who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

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Nor stands in the way of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of scoffers...

(Holy Bible, 1060)

This ethical linearity is unreal and impractical. He re-renders the psalm with a rationalist's twist thus:

Blessed is the man that walketh
Not in the counsel of the conventional,
And is at home with sin as with a wife.
He shall listen patiently to the scorn-
ful, and understand the sources of their
scorn.

("Latter-Day Psalms-1", 252)

According to the persona this rewarding/blessing is the result of modern rationalism coupled with humanism pointing to a sort of a reasonable humility of the model religious mind. It contrasts with the pride and arrogance of the protagonist of the new Hindi poetry who implores the divine with a revolutionary exuberance overstepping human limits.

Whereas the protagonist of Hindi poetry is not disheartened by the complexity of life, the tension between existence and essence, life and death, immortality and mortality, soul and body etc., bogs down the exploring zeal of the protagonist of English poetry to human limits. Through his prayers he negotiates with the polarities of life. The protagonist of Hindi poetry does address these complexities of life but he does not succumb to their pressure. His options are clear and bold. Ezekiel's persona on the other hand is lost in the paradoxes of life. In "Hymns of Darkness" the poet-persona comes out with a number of paradoxical statements revealing the centripetal and centrifugal pulls of his rational consciousness thus:

He has exchanged the wisdom of youthfulness
for the follies of maturity.

What is lost is certain, what is gained
of dubious value.

Self-esteem stunts his growth. He has not learnt
how to be nobody.

("Hymns in Darkness - 1", 217)

The protagonist of Ezekiel's 'Hymns' looks at the nakedness of truth/ in the spirit of Peeping Tom' (218). 'The fixed star of his seeking . . . multiplies

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like a candle/ in the eyes of a drunkard' (218). The prayers of the protagonist of Hindi poetry, on the contrary, are centred in strong, unflinching convictions of self-denial. There is no such blurring of the vision. The persona of hymns does not have the moral strength to confront life head on. Therefore he prefers manipulation to direct confrontation thus:

> He's still a puny self
> hoping to manipulate the universe and all
> its manifest powers for his own advancement,
> advantages.
>
> ("Hymns-2", 218)

The spirit to counter or contest the paradoxes of life is awfully missing. This persona lacks the [political] activism that fires the imagination of the protagonist of Hindi poetry. Instead of challenging the stale and the outworn, he prefers to stick to the familiar. Experimentation could be very dicey and unpredictable in terms of outcome:

> His follies are familiar,
> accepted
> like old friends.
> Incapable of quarrelling with them,
> he maintains the old
> stale
> unredeemable relationships.
>
> ("Hymns - VT, 219-220)

This is an attitude of resignation and compromise. In fact this swing from utter resignation to a human compromise is very common in the prayers of Ezekiel. The prayers do not go beyond the level of compromise.

In Ezekiel's "Hymns" the intentions of the persona are not religious or spiritual. Instead of the divine, the focus is on the ordinary man and his ordinary conflicts. Even in Hindi poetry the focus shifts from the divine to the human, but this human is not an ordinary being of common interests; his struggles, aspirations and designs are serious and sublime. The persona of Ezekiel's hymns is just 'simply a man' with no other special significant attributes. His physical outlook, age, marital status, profession etc. do no count much

> A man, it's often been said,
> is simply a man.
> .....

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He's not tall and handsome
or small and crabbed-looking.
He's simply a man,
and his speech is human.
The rest is important
to understand that speech.

("Hymns-X", 222)

This man 'partly in exile from himself,/partly in a prison of his own making', despite being 'energetic' is always unsure of the fate of his ventures. Even before he takes off, the spectre of defeat haunts him:

A tireless social human being,
destined always
to know defeat
like a twin brother.

("Hymns - 13", 233)

The protagonist of Hindi poetry rises from the ashes of near total defeat. The fear of defeat happens to be just a passing phase. Rather, this fear activates his credo of evolution. In the prayers of Ezekiel, the fear of defeat is so overwhelming that it demoralizes the persona into settling in favour of some self-preserving formulae. A feeling of defeatism cripples all his initiatives. In fact this persona of 'common touch' (233) is 'master/either of death nor of life' ("Hymns-XVI", 225); neither belief nor disbelief can save such a man. He is 'forced by the five senses/ to fear the five senses' ("Hymns -XIV", 224).

Ezekiel's oft-quoted "The Egoist's Prayers" once again reveal the poet persona's rather casual and nonchalant attitude towards the divine. Hardly overawed by the sovereign authority and power of God, the persona treats Him as just another being sans any divine retributive power. These prayers are in fact informal, unceremonious one-sided conversations with God. Hindi poets pray with equal arrogance and informality, but they are never flippant or playful. Using paradoxes and inversions as his modus operandi, the persona of Ezekiel's prayers always disrupts the serious and the sublime. For Ezekiel, the facts of life and the problems and attitudes of the modern man are too real to be governed or dictated by religious and mythical truths. It is in this light that the poet-persona in "Prayer-IV" ridicules the concept of the 'chosen people of God' who only can execute His will. The persona adopts a rather casual posture and asks God to spare him from His ordainments, as he has his own problems and aspirations. Accepting the limitations of the human will, he says that he may however 'oblige' God if His will coincides with his own:

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Do not choose me, O Lord,
to carry out thy purposes.
I'm quite worthy, of course,
but I have my own purposes.
You have plenty of volunteers
to choose from. Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one?

O well, if you insist,
I'll do your will.
Please try to make it coincide with mine.(213)

This is a wistful rendering of 'thy will be done' but with the difference that while the Bible says 'as it is done in Heaven', the persona would say 'as it ought to be done and is done on earth.' The absolute will of God has been translated into the human will in the prayer. The will of God is important for the orthodox Jew, but for the liberal poet-persona, the human will is real and an average destiny is fine.

Once the focus shifts from heaven to earth, the material concerns become important. In the following prayer, the persona pokes fun at the Biblical concept of transcending all material concerns:

Let me be, O Lord,
the Camel of the Higher Income Group
Who passes smoothly through
the eye of that needle. (213)

Caught between precept and example, ideal and deed, the persona chooses the humanistic option. This is in sharp contrast to the risky and highly ambitious idealistic options of the protagonist of Hindi poetry.

In "Prayer-III" the persona offers a 'cryptic comment on the impossibility of resigning oneself to the pure action without craving for compensaion' (Kumar, 263):

No, Lord
not the fruit of action
is my motive.
But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
and I'm so hungry.(212)

It is philosophy humanized with a bit of naughty laugh at the enthusiasts.

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The protagonist of Hindi prayers lacks this subtle sense of humour. For him praying is an act of throwing a challenge to the authority of God, but this challenge must be articulated in bold, candid terms without any non-serious act of inversion or subversion. Humour, in scheme, runs contrary to the seriousness of the prayer.

Ezekiel's persona 'does not conceive of God in terms of His Olympian aloofness or as an awesome supernatural reality' (Singh, 54). In his characteristic intimate style the unorthodox persona asks God to perform His duties to rescue Man. The role of God as an inert, unchanging overseer is held to ridicule in "Prayer-II" thus:

> The vices I've always had
> I still have.
> The virtues I've never had
> I still do not have.
> Form this Human Way of Life
> Who can rescue Man
> If not his Maker?
> Do thy duty, Lord. (212)

The maverick poet-persona does understand the need of some God, but this need is often expressed ironically in the prayers. Moreover this God is not beyond criticism. He can be pulled up for not performing his duties. A feeling of metaphysical exhaustion consistently drags him back on the plane of pragmatic objectives. The theological urge is always stated in balanced humanistic terms thus:

> The price of wisdom
> is too high,
> but folly is expensive too.
> Strike a bargain with me, Lord.
> I'm not a man of ample means. (2-13)

This attitude of shaking hands with God on mutually favourable terms is in sharp contrast with the rebellious attitude of the protagonist of Hindi poetry who, despite all odds and adversities, carries the banner of struggle unrelentingly without any respite or crisis in convictions. Here, two lines from an oral poem of Naresh Mehta are quoted to bring forth the contrast in attitudes:

> O Lord,
> if You have given poverty to me

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give me the resolve too.
(On the leaflet of *Aranya*)

Hindi poetry is poetry of resolution and determination, Indian English poetry is poetry of compromise, adjustment and bargain.

Over-all 'The Egoist's Prayers" are prayers of a 'modern city man, unattached to any faith, sceptical of ritual and doctrine, but needing some kind of method, technique or belief to calm the self of this disquiet' (King, 103) Irony or inversion emerges not just as a technique, it turns out to be a strategy of his survival, a value in itself. P.K.J. Kurup rightly terms these prayers as "document of a cynical Salvationist's self-scrutiny" (90-91) This intellectual cynicism does not raise the prayers to a level of vehement defiance of the divine; it however does put the divine under the shadow of doubt. The Hindi poets progress from doubt of defiance; Indian English poets move from defiance to doubt.

VII

Ramanujan's "Prayers to Lord Murugan" are, like Ezekiel's "Latter-Day Psalms" and "Hymns in Darkness", modern skeptical secular equivalents of traditional Indian religious literature. The eleven prayers that constitute the poem present an ironic and comic version of *Tirumurugattrupadai* [A Guide to the Holy Murugan] in which the fifth century Tamil poet Nakkirar sings the praises of Lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. In this original Tamil Guide, Murugan is valorized as "the war-god of the Dravidians, and the patron deity of the kuravas or hunting tribes of the Dravidian country. Probably this god is not an entirely imaginary being, but a war-like king who was deified, as often happened in the case of heroes of primitive communities . . . Murugan is referred to by various names: the spouse of a wife of spotless purity; the red god; the child of six mothers; the son of the god under the banyan three; the captain of the heavenly hosts; the tall god; the god of hills. The meaning of Murugan is 'the eternally young one', or 'the beautiful one' (Chelliah, 332). Ramanujan's (post) modern persona invokes this multi-faceted god not as much for any spiritual emancipation or ennoblement as it is for the mundane and practical purposes of ordinary life.

The ironic subversion begins right at the outset. In the original Tamil prayers, Lord Murugan 'shows his presence at all festivals/that are with much pomp held on holidays' (355). The rejoicing followers herald his arrival with "the flag that bears/ the image of a cock" (355) in "Prayer-I", the sceptic

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persona of Ramanujan's prayers does not herald His arrival as simply an arrival of goodwill and harmony among the worshipping tribals; rivalries too appear with His arrival. The image of cock, a symbol of victory in war, reveals the rivalries within the tribes. Therefore the intellectual persona sees in His arrival, the arrival of both love and hate:

> Lovers and rivals
> arrive
> at once with cockfight and banner-
> dance
> (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems*, "Prayers to Lord Murugan",
> 113)

The poet-persona wonders how Lord Murugan reconciles with his six faces. As a human being, the persona finds it difficult to reconcile even with his one face. In his "Self-Portrait" he discovers 'a stranger' in him (23). With this ordinary human experience at the back of his mind, he wonders, 'Twelve etched arrowheads/ for eyes and six unforeseen/ faces, and you were not/ embarrassed.' ("Prayer-2", 113). Further the persona is surprised by the fact that all six faces are functional. In the original Tamil Prayer, each face performs a specific duty:

> One face diffuses countless rays of light
> removing from the world its darkness dense.
> Another face, because its devotees
> do praise him, casts on them a gracious look
> and grants the boon for which they pray with love
> and joy. A third is on the watch to guard
> the sacrifices Brahmin priests perform,
> ..... A forth doth search
> the hidden truths and light the sages, minds.
> A fifth .... celebrates the victory gained by rites
> performed in the battlefield. The sixth face loves
> to enjoy itself with Valli, consort young . . .
> (Chelliah, 347)

The poet-persona also wonders how twelve eyes and six faces made love with one woman. This comparison of the divine with the human is a strategy of reversal. The surprise expressed by the poet-persona is highly ironic and mocking in its intent. It is contrived to de-mythicize the divine.

In "Prayers-3, 4, 5", the irrelevance of Lord Murugan and his divine attributes is highlighted through the juxtaposition of the mythical and the

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existential. As a denizen of the modern city Chicago, the poet-persona asks the red god Murugan:

> will the red flower ever
> come to the branches
> of the blueprint
>
> city? (114)

The mythical red is set in contrast with the modern blue. In the next prayer, 'our yellow grass and lily seed' are juxtaposed with the 'rams'/flesh and scarlet rice for the carnivals/on river' ("Prayers-4", 114). It is significant to note that 'red millet mixed with blood' (Chelliah, 355) used to be offered to Lord Murugan by the hill tribes. In "Prayer-5", Lord Murugan is invoked as 'Lord of the spoor of the tigress' (115). The valiant god is juxtaposed with the 'Rajahs [who] stand in photographs/over ninefoot silken tigress/ that sycophants have shot.' (115) This juxtaposition is a strategy of camouflage; the underlying irreverence is conveyed subtly lest it becomes a total distrust of the divine.

In "Prayer-5" of the original Tamil prayers, Lord Murugan is described as the red god ' in red robes;/young leaves of the red-trunk asoka/ flutter in his ears' (Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, 23). In another original prayer, this god 'doth wear upon his sacred head' the 'fire-red kanthal bloom' (Chelliah, 343). This god who 'wields the javelin red' 25, is deliberately addressed as 'Master of red bloodstains' in "Prayer-6" by Ramanujan's praying persona with an intention of subversion. The colour red in the original prayers is suggestive of vibrant tribal life. The red robes made up of red flowers and leaves of asoka symbolize healthy, fearless life. The poet-persona sees hardly any relevance of the red god because 'our blood is brown;/ our collars [are] white' (116).

The colours brown and colours white represent the urban sensibility of the persona. The juxtaposition of colours brings into play by the principle of association, juxtaposition between the tribal values and urban imperatives. In the next prayer, the mode of ironic irreverence continues. The persona disputes the holy idea that man is cast in the image of God thus:

> Lord of the twelve right hands
> why are we your mirror men
> with the two left hands
> capable only of casting
> reflections? (116)

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The search is not aimed towards the attainment of any multi-faceted vision. The crisis of retaining and preserving the average human face (or sight) needs to be addressed first and foremost:

> Lord
> of faces,
>
> find us the face
> we lost early
> early this morning (116)

Only gods can afford the luxury of having six faces. The poet persona struggles to save his only face!

The "Prayer-8" once again brings into play the poet-persona's flippant and casual attitude towards the spiritual and the divine. Like Ezekiel's persona the ordinary; 'Lord of headlines,/ help us read /the small print.' (116) The persona's immediate concern is restricted to the retrieval of his basic human self. The very idea of being endowed with a rarefied sixth sense is fanciful and remote to his human experience. He would be much happier to retain his five senses; chasing after the elusive sixth sense is futile: 'Lord of the sixth sense/give us back/our five senses' (116). The poet-persona demands annihilation/ dissolution of the human self. The poet-persona seeks this dissolution but without any risk of drowning: 'Lord of solutions/teach us to dissolve/ and not to drown' (116). G.N. Devy also observes the limited range of Ramanujan's plunge into the unknown infinite: 'to belong is to drown oneself in one's particular context. Ramanujan would be willing to drown himself only "eye-deep" .... he would altogether resist drowing.' (18). In "Prayer-9", the poet-persona reveals his total distrust in any exploration of the absent and the (Absolute) unseen. The awareness of history, mythology and metaphysical absences unnecessarily complicates human living. For a relatively simple and straight living the persona prays:

> Deliver us O presences
> from proxies
> and absences

He does not want to carry the burden of history and myth. "From Sanskrit and the mythologies/ of night and the several/ roundtable mornings", he seeks a future un-tampered by past - immediate as well as remote: ". . . and return/ the future to what/ it was (117)".

The protagonist of Hindi poetry does not disown history and myth as stumbling blocks in his evolution. The historical, the mythological and the

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existential—all the three experiences go into the evolution of this protagonist; in Ramanujan's poetry the historical and the mythological are forsaken in favour of the existential.

VIII

If Ezekiel rationalizes ancient hymns and biblical psalms in terms of existentical experience, Ramanujan parodies traditional Tamil Prayers with post modernist intentions of inversion; Jayanta Mahapatra re-w/rites 'ancient rite[s] of dead years' ("Thirst", *Waiting*, 15) without their religious/ metaphysical splendour. In the quasi-meditative vision of Mahapatra's sceptic persona, ancient rites are nothing more than 'words of ridiculous centuries; /each syllable heavy, blind,/ rolling ponderously across the water / like blocks of fog' (*Waiting*, "Sun Worshipper Bathing", 36).

Mahapatra does not write prayer-poetry as such, but the very frequency of the term 'rites' in his poetic oeuvre does suggest that (un)consciously ancient rites as hymns/prayers do provide him a poetic form. His poems as rites do not have any spiritual solemnity of the traditional rites for the poet does not believe in the incantatory potential of the word. To him rite is 'a recurring prayer' (*A Rain of Rites*, "Myth", 22) or at best stylized response to reality. His poems, therefore, happen to be a stylized response(s) to reality. Such a response has an implicit irony which not only reveals the impotency of modern rites (as against the immense potency of vedic mantras) but also exposes the inertia that has set in our life. These rites, hitherto defined in terms of karma, happen to be rites of/on passivity.

With such notions of rites as a poetic form, Mahapatra's person invokes morning thus:

> The sweeper-girl walking by,
> the can of human excrement
> cradled
> in her frail arm
>
> A window
> is thrown
> open to the street.
> Some woman's derisive look
> falls from the cool shadows. .....
>
> (*Waiting*/"The Morning-I", 1)

This is not just a vignette of a particular morning, this is the persona's formula

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of the morning as such. The persona seems to suggest that, invoke these morning specific images and the morning would dawn upon earth. It is in this sense Mahapatra's poems could be described as modern rites. The dawn, like the morning is also ritualized:

> There is a dawn which travels alone,
> without the effort of creation, without puzzle.
> It stands simply, framed in the door while in the air:
>
> an Indian woman, piled up to her silences,
> waiting for what the world will only let her do
> (*A Rain of Rites*, "Dawn", 9)

In the Indian canon of rites dawn is equated with divine beginning (i.e., braham mahoorat), it is an auspicious period of hope, possibilities and fresh beginning. Mahapatra's persona obviously does not attach any such divine sanctity to the dawn. In a clear contrast, Vashishta the owner of cows in Rg Veda, invokes dawn in discernible vibrant terms thus:

> Like a youthful maiden. Dawn shines brightly forth,
> stirring to motion every living creative.
> Divine fire was kindled for the use of men;
> Dawn created light, driving away the dark.
> .....
> Blessed, bearing the sun, the eye of the gods,
> Leading her white horse, magnificent to see,
> Dawn reveals herself, arrayed in beams of light.
> And with boundless glory she transforms the world.
> .....
> O bountiful, shower blessings on the singer.
> (Rg Veda VII. 77)

Vedic rites are externalized versions of divine revelation; Mahapatra's rites are externalized forms of human revelation.

In the existential vision of Mahapatra's rather saturnine persona, sun-rise too is a ritual sans any warmth or divine halo. Subverting the religious tone of hymns on the sun, the persona discovers nothing extra-ordinary in sun-rise. To him

> [it is] A common happening, an ordinary day.
> It is ten a.m., and schoolgirls
> in white frocks add red waistbands are going by.
> .....

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Huddled close, the friendly crowd watches
half the street dissolved to speechless breeze.
A black humped bull rides the cow:
two gods copulating on the warm tar,
.....
The great body of the cow gropes for breath,
a little dribble breaks, taut on her tethered rope
..... (*A Rain of Rites*, "Sunburst", 30)

As against this rather prosaic, mechanical and stylized invocation of sunrise, the highly-cultivated persona of Naresh Mehta's poetry celebrates the event of sun rise with religious awe and spiritual fervour thus:

The place where you stood yesterday
such a sun-rise had taken place
celebrating which
the birds of infinite [skies]
were smearing gulal of that festival of the divine honey
That the god of the sky
was offering honey [to everyone]
from the honey-hive of your light
and earth -
it was looking like a
a sweet-honeyed [bride] eager for marriage.
(*Utsava*, "Suryodaya,, Ek Sambhavna", 45)

Notes

All the quotes from Hindi poetry have been translated by the author himself.

1. "A song of praise to God; esp.. a metrical composition adopted to be sung in a religious service, sometimes distinct from psalm or anthem, as not being part of the text of the Bible" (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1060).
2. "A religious lyrical song extolling the glory of God and used in conjunction with prayer or worship. The psalm can be considered in a general sense any song or song of sacred nature." (*The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, 248).

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Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*: Reconstructing Indian Female Identity

Ashis Sengupta

Can a male reader-critic truly appreciate a feminist text? The lead essay in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith's 1986 anthology. *Men in Feminism*, opens thus: "Man's relation to feminism is an impossible one" except as an act of penetration, violence, coercion, or appropriation (Heath 1). But Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden's "Introduction" to their 1990 collection. *Engendering Men*, strikes a different note: "Feminism has engendered us, even as we engender a practice that might not always be the *same* as feminist practice..." (l).Yet problems persist with male feminist criticism. The male critic's avowed efforts at engendered self-clarification might rum into a sexist appropriation of feminist discourse. Nevertheless, feminism has foregrounded sexuality as a crucial component in *any* thoroughgoing analysis of textuality, making the critic aware of her/his own gendered subject position and of the gender of the writer who produced the text.

Anita Desai's second novel. *Voices in the City* (1965), had long been regarded by the Western academia as a portrait of a dark, joyless city called Calcutta and by the critics back home as an artistic failure for its "out-of-place" female characters in the overall design established by the male protagonist. But theoretical approaches to literary study over the past few decades have taught us to comprehend and respect heterogeneity and difference as against the colonist and sexist tendency to reduce difference to a single identity. Postcolonial and feminist theory share a common ground in interrogating structures of domination and addressing the role they play in the network of power, knowledge and canon formation. Thanks to such revisionist approaches to non-traditional texts, Desai's novel has not only found pride of place in the English curricula of most Indian universities but had reappraisals in die West as well. Opposing earlier Eurocentric/

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androcentric readings of *Voices*, this paper attempts to re-read the novel as a significant discourse on the female identity in postcolonial India By depicting women who "go in the opposite direction", Desai subverts the "quintessential" feminine ideal rooted in Hindu mythology and manifest in the cultural nationalism and socioeconomic sectors of both pre- and post-independence India. With the exception of the first part, devoted to Nirode's "masculine" world, the remaining three parts of the novel foreground the struggle of three women for self-definition.

An "avowedly" subjective writer, Desai "nonetheless displays an acute understanding of the social, cultural, and material impediments faced by her female characters in their search for self-fulfillment" (Mann 156). In her own words, her earlier work addresses "the life of women, especially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds." Later Desai started writing more about men and their lives on the assumption that "they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences." But this proved "impossible". Soon she "could hear…[her women]... screaming in the background, banging on the doors, being very hysterical" (Desai, "An Interview"). While Desai does not portray female exploitation and oppression across all classes and castes in her fiction, she does document the specificities of the victimization of educated, middle-class, urban women. Set in a transitional India, *Voices in the City* is a culturally and historically specific text that balances this victimization with different modes of protest, and "participates in creating a new feminist ideology in Indian literature written in English" (Mann 156). Of the three women in the novel, the sexually colonized Monisha chooses death not as an escape from but as a protest against the prevalent patriarchal ideology. Though less rebellious than Monisha, Amla also displays a great sense of resilience and independence by trying to make the best of the kind of life she is somewhat forced to live. In a culture that still valorizes the stereotypes of submissive wife, self-abnegating widow and nurturing mother, Otima proves an iconoclastic Indian woman. Appropriating the alternative myth of Indian femininity as embodied in Goddess Kali, Desai presents Otima as a symbol of the resurgence of female power which destroys the old to create a new order and thus reconciles life's contraries. The "city" in the novel is an extension of this image in its abrogating of orthodox male authority and in its potency of a "frightening" female sexuality. The structure and attitude of middle-class families in Calcutta (Kolkata) have definitely changed since the novel was written, but *Voices* can always be considered as an important social document of the times it addresses. One can even claim that the topicality of the book remains unabated as Indian women are still grappling with fundamentalism that now operates in newer guises.

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It is interesting to review the cultural ethos that perpetuates gender discrimination in India and serves as a background to the narratives of Desai's female characters. Men, irrespective of race, caste and creed, have always shared certain attitudes towards women, producing ambivalent female stereotypes in life and literature, myths and scriptures. In India, to be specific, Hindu scriptures and ancient legal codes both deify and circumscribe women. Those who live up to the feminine "ideal" as encoded there, are considered divine; those who deviate are "fallen". In either case, the Indian woman is denied the status of a normal human and thus forced into a servitude that, in Stanley Wolpert's words, "border[s] on slavery" (366). *The Bhagavad-Gita* declares women, like the lower castes, to be baser forms of life with little light to transcendence and eternity. The influential *Manusambhita* treats them as men's property, arguing against their freedom on the grounds that women are lascivious and adulterous by nature. Manu also equates a woman with a *sudra* and denies both the night to property. On the other side of the coin is the image of woman as an object of worship: The "good" woman in India is the mother first and the mother last, an incarnation; of divinity Sita of the *Ramayana*— chaste, selfless and utterly devoted to her husbands—is still regarded as the ideal wife. Again, woman, according to Manu, is the light of the house because she gives birth to children, brings them up and provides various services. Clearly, the aura of light created around her is a ploy to keep her actually in the dark about matters outside home. The *pallu*, much like the *burka*, remains a powerful symbol of the Indian woman's invisibility in a male-dominated society. Although the ancient codes have long been replaced by modern social/legal structures, the sentiments underlying those codes persist to this day, giving rise to new forms of gender politics.

Anti-colonial and nationalist movements in India did open up spaces for women; but we must guard—Ania Loomba correctly maintains—against a simple celebration of their participation. The image of the Nation-as-Mother largely turned the freedom they gained from some older orthodoxies into a fresh subservience (216). While Raja Rammohan Roy's fight for women resulting in the legislation against *sati* in 1829 is a matter of pride for us, Jashodhara Bagchi rightly points out at a recent seminar, songs like *Bolo bolo bolo sabey*, composed a hundred years later with verses like "pati putra tarey sukhey tyagi pran", celebrate another kind of *sati* (qtd. in Vidyarthi 3). Women's social/political engagements in independent India do not *always* indicate a feminist consciousness either. As there have been efforts in recent years to harness their political activities to right-wing movements and especially to religious fundamentalism. Civil Liberties groups have also subordinated questions of women's sexuality and autonomy to supposedly larger

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concerns. Indian women have certainly achieved several of their coveted rights; but what we should realize is that to isolate colonialism from its later-day evolution is to deflect attention from the changing narratives of the nation, religion, labour, education, health and the family which are the crucibles within which gender functions today. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, quoting extensively form ancient Hindu texts, contends that despite urbanization and education, a "formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood... still [in the mid-Seventies] governs die inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community" (*Inner World* 68). Desai almost corroborates it in a 1990 article, "A Secret Connivance": "[The] one hundred thousand ...cults built around the Mother Goddess.... [the] fecund figure from whom all good things flow....make her not merely the ideal mother but the ideal woman—consort, lover, plaything"(972). Citing illiteracy and material dependence that still make Indian women "connive at" this mythological idealization, Desai seeks to explain their complicity in their servitude. A recent nation-wide survey of Indian families (National Family Health Survey II) offers a shocking revelation: wife beating is an offence for which most Indian women find some justification or the other. On the other hand, women's organizations across the country have lent active support to the Bill for Protection from Domestic Violence 2002, tabled at Parliament and still awaiting clearance (Kar 3). Legislation certainly has significant bearing on social change. But what is more important is the attitude that forms the core of a cultural fabric. In this context, Indian women have miles to go before they truly realize their immense potential—on their own terms.

Hindu mythology may be replete with female figures idealizing (lie virtues of woman's chastity, submission and sacrifice—all to the benefit of men, but it also has a considerable body of cultural imagery that militates against traditional male orthodoxies Kali in Hindu mythology is one such icon that Desai appropriates, as Bharati Mukherjee does in her *Jasmine* (1989), to symbolize the liberated woman. Cast in the image of a semi-naked black woman with a garland of skulls around her neck and her gory tongue outstretched as she steps on the prostrate body of Shiva, Kali is the symbol of cosmic female power and resistance to male control over the ages. "The product of the pre-Aryan age given over to the predominantly female-centred beliefs", says Mann, Kali presents the most potent counter-discourse to latter-day patriarchal trappings of power and authority (159). Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi also believe that the matriarchal myth of Kali "tells the story of [Indian] women's continuing power and their resistance to male control" (55). Significantly, the contemporary women's movement in India

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has adopted Kali as a symbol for their goal of freedom from patriarchal hegemony. India's first feminist publishing house, established in 1984, is called Kali for Women. Urvashi Butalia of the publishing house says: "[The name] acquired a lot of meaning for us - as a symbol of womanpower. Kali is the avatar in which Parvati destroys the world, fed up with her husband's intrusiveness after having wondered all over the world. She is not a consort, she is an independent woman. To my mind, she destroys the world in order to create a new world" (qtd. in Vidyarthi 3). Mann also reminds us that "Kali is not ... the murderous cannibal of common perception" (15). Annihilating the mighty demon Raktabija, she poses a threat to the male principle and phallic power. In addition, the figure of Kali is an enabling one for women because of the goddess's legendary sexual dominance over Shiva. The image of Dakshina-Kali, sitting erotically over Shiva, is a case in point.

It is important to see how Desai juxtaposes the two different orders of cultural discourse, both rooted in Hindu mythology, to create a new site for contemporary Indian women. In fact, she situates the patriarchal practices of Indian Hindu society to contest them from within and then brings in alternative, empowering images of Indian femininity to celebrate the transformations of female consciousness. Desai not only uses alternative myths to create new paradigms but recasts old attitudes into new motifs to achieve her liberalist purpose. Thus the nature of resistance varies from suicide as a "stand against the general current" to the severance of all bonds for absolute autonomy

Most reviews of *Voices* following its publication were universalist/gender-neutral readings of the story. *The Deccan Herald* viewed the novel as "an unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross-currents of changing social values". *The Tribune* also overstressed the bohemian life-style of Calcuttans: "Calcutta evidently can be as good a centre of Bohemians as Paris...." But the novel particularly articulates women's stories. Desai divides her novel into four parts, each named after the narrative of one member of the Ray family, in order to predicate the central issue of communication upon gender relations. In Bakhtin's views, a novel can never be totally monologic, since the narrator's reports of the utterances of another character are inescapably "double-voiced" and "dialogic". But *Voices in the City* is, self-consciously, a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple "voices", or modes of discourse. It has the plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices, with no possibility of a decisive resolution into the monologic truth of the male protagonist.

Written from Nirode's perspective. Part I recounts his life: his experiences as a petty journalist, his experiments with a little magazine; and his Hamletian musings upon life and death. The past Nirode cannot confront

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is his childhood, his memory of his mother's infidelity to her husband (true or otherwise, the reader is never told). This "turning away" becomes his modus operand! with the, rest of the world as well (Afzal Khan 69). Having been hurt and betrayed once, Nirode thinks that all relationships and all attempts at communication are hopeless, doomed, to defeat: "Marriage, bodies, touch and torture. He shuddered and, walking swiftly, was almost afraid of the dark of Calcutta... he decided... *all that had to do with marriage was destructive, negative, decadent*" (35; italics mine). Thus, Nirode feels of himself "that he was a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring" (24). In his nihilism he does not think positively of the people he knows But while he tells the men's stones more or less fully, he pushes women off to the periphery of the "masculine" world of work. Only once in his narrative does Nirode think of his sisters. But then he dismisses his conjectures very soon: "Nirode did not know", and he does not care to find (8). And mother Otima becomes relevant to him in Part I just through two letters. Drawing a parallel between India's servitude under colonial rule and the Indian woman's "slave" mentality, he ridicules the latter as "one of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali [by extension, Indian] women" with "nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stones in her pantry, and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront" (81). Nirode's misogyny can be ascribed to the age-old cultural denigration of Indian women as well as to his own ambivalent attitude towards his sexually liberated mother. Ironically, it is through Monisha's suicide that Nirode's "rebellion" against the absurdity of life comes to an end and his simultaneous quest for meaning acquires any relevance. Although he claims that death is better than cowardly compromise, he himself is incapable of any such heroic revolt. Rather, it is Monisha's death through "an excess of caring" that reconciles him with others and to "die whole fantastic design of life and death". Sitting beside her body, Nirode "seemed unable to remain still or silent, he was filled with an immense care of the world that made him reach out, again and again, to touch" the shivering Amia and their numb aunt. He admits his narrowness and feels grateful to his dead sister for "opening his heart" to the world of "communication, relationship, joy and responsibility" (248-56). But even this self-realization, if you will, is negated at the novel's end as he sees his mother.

Unlike Nirode's "masculinist" narrative, the remaining three parts of the novel - "Monisha", Amia", and "Mother" - tell the stories of' both women and men, though with an accent on the former's suffering and struggle. Again, Monisha's story is different from the other three in that it is in the form of a diary and therefore a highly personal text. It has been so designed as to underscore the interiority of female experience in India,

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although Monisha's history is recorded not only in her own narrative but also in Amia's and Otima's. When the novel was written, there was little difference between educated and uneducated Indian women in the context of choosing one's husband. Intelligent and self-conscious, Monisha was, however, not allowed to select her man. As Amia wonders over her parents' choice of a "boring nonentity" for her sister, she has the answer from her aunt. When this wise old woman visited Jiban's family before anybody else did and reported to Monisha's father that "they were a respectable, middle-class Congress family, completely unsuitable to Monisha's taste and inclinations", the father "decided ...that it was the light family". And Monisha's mother, unhappy in her own incompatible marriage yet aware of the difficulty of finding a husband for her educated and sensitive daughter, "excused" the match on the grounds that "it would be a good thing for her [Monisha] to be settled into such a stolid, unimaginative family as that. Just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance" (198-99). But the reality mocks the parents' decisions and belies their expectations. The opening entry in Monisha's diary records her literal as well as symbolic subjugation/ imprisonment in an orthodox Hindu family. As she enters Jiban's house.

> I feel a surreptitious push from Jiban and am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother who... while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder... and still harder, till I realize what it means, and go down on my knees to touch her feet... .Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another....More....Feet before faces here... .Into the courtyard we go... and the tiered balconies... rise all around us, shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well water (109).

Circumscribed both mentally and physically on (ideological and economic levels, Monisha typifies countless Indian women. She envies, Nirode's non-attachment and wishes her life, too, could be like this:

> Look at me, my equipment, my appurtenances. My…family, my duties of serving fresh chapaties to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife. If all this were to blow away, what would be left would be very small. Yet, it would be lighter to bear. Nirode is lighter now (1,12).

However, Monisha's desire to escape responsibility does not stem from a neurotic desire to escape the real, as Nirode's does. Rather, it is an under-

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standable, even justifiable response of an intelligent woman whose creativity and freedom are completely curtailed within the bounds of a traditional Indian marriage.

Initially, Monisha agrees to dwindle into a typical Bengali (read Indian) wife. Buteven her efforts to adjust come to naught with her mother-in-law accusing her of stealing Jiban's money. The charge could be framed largely because Monisha was economically dependent on Jiban But to view it from a different angle, a culture that idealizes the wife as her husband's *ardhangini* simultaneously denies her equal right to his income! Jiban cannot defend her because he, like countless Indian men, must remain a "faithful" son rather than be a supportive husband. Why had Monisha never rebelled? The average Indian female is brought up on the ideals of sacrifice and compromise. First, she must be a dutiful daughter conforming to the patriarchal practice of arranged marriage; second, she must be a submissive wife and daughter-in-law maintaining the "dignity" of her adopted family. Failing to defend Monisha, Jiban contributes to her growing alienation. Deprived of any confidantes, she starts keeping a diary to record the details of her dark, caged life. Love is not there in her relationship with Jiban, "which is filled only by loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed." Nor is it there in her relationship with her mother, "which is filled with an inbred and valid sense of duty, of honour, of concern" (135-36). Suffering as well from the absence of love in her childlessness, Monisha finally chooses suicide over a claustrophobic life.

Is Monisha "a victim of Hindu familial ideology and patriarchal oppression", asks Mann, or "a victor, transcending the reaches of patriarchy in her 'madness' and death?" (165). On one level, she is a victim. Judged by Hindu scriptural teachings that still equate woman's normality with domesticity and motherhood, Monisha appears abnormal to her in-laws. She is not one of those Bengali women, "infinitely patient about their long eyes,... Waiting for nothing, waiting on men setf-centred and indifferent" (120). Alert and reserve, she is distrusted by her in-laws and perceived as a threat to "this stronghold of practicality and chatter" (119). However, living a circumscribed life, she has no less internalized their "values". Monisha has become a regular reader of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, though she laments the absence of love in Jiban's house and cannot whole-heartedly accept the words of the mythic Keshava about non-attachment. She becomes a paranoid, but the reasons are not very far to seek. She loses her sense of security as patriarchal pressures shatter her self-confidence. She imagines the incessant repetition of Sanskrit verses by a nephew to "have been contrived solely to drive [her] mad". She is fearful that "they" would "spring on [her], claw the flesh off [her] back and devour it" (112, 118). To this are added her

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frustration at her unfulfilled sexuality, her lack of privacy, and her material dependence despite her education. On another level, her "madness" culminating in her death may be viewed as her protest against the slow social killing of a woman Monisha's raw act of defiance runs counter to the patriarchal imperative to uphold the imperfect institutions of marriage and family as sacred. It invokes the psychic power that is required in such an intolerable situation to resist humiliation. In contrast to many other women who endure endless suffering, Monisha chooses the freedom death can grant, subverting, as it were, one of the age-old female stereotypes.

In Part II of the novel, Desai tells the story of Amia, the third sibling, who is superficially different from Nirode and Monisha in that she arrives in Calcutta, full of energy and determined to succeed. At least initially, "she seems neither burdened by an oppressive past nor desirous of a retreat to solitude" (Afzal-Khan 71). On the contrary, she mingles in society and goes to several parties in order to establish a clientele for herself in her professional world of advertising. But beneath her vivacious exterior Amia harbours a "terrible destructiveness", a "dark way of thinking through life towards death" (175). Despite her economic independence, Amia soon feels the 'rot' setting in— overnight, without warning". She "perceives the fraudulence underlying her work, the pettines of her social round, and her lack of connectedness with family and friends" (Mann 166).

Nirode takes Amia to his friend Dharma, an artist who has retreated from life, like Nirode, and for years has painted nothing but, insects and plants. The series of meetings that ensues between Amia and Dharma brings about a curious transformation in both of them. Amia, for the first time in her life, begins to feel the power of love: "Amala's love, knowing no possibility of manifestation, became one uncontrollable desire to communicate" (193). On the other hand, the impact other love on the reclusive Dharma transforms "his hitherto grotesque, surrealistic vision of the world to one that is whole, unified" (Afzal-Khan 72). Dharma comes to draw human figures, leaving behind the world of non-human objects, and ends by painting a complete portrait of Amia. Amia dared not at first claim that "she was the cause of this great change". But "more and more [she] began to appear whole and alive and meaningful in herself..." (212). Nevertheless, she is also betrayed by a manipulative man. "Where Jiban quells Monisha's early ardour with his impassiveness", to put it in Mann's words, "Dharma's treatment is even more reprehensible" (167). Conscious of her vulnerability to his charms, Dharma exploits Amla's candour and freshness to perfect his art, but discards her in favour of other models when she is no more useful to him. Thus Amia's quest for selfhood seems to end in disillusionment and "an abiding isolation" (145).

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Though less courageous than Monisha, Amia displays a resilience that still helps her shape her own life. Resisting the advances of several young men, she chooses at the novel's end to begin anew as an illustrator of children's stones, thus signalling an optimistic future. Amia realizes

> that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew that she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and sane people... because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin
> (248; italics mine).

This may sound like a somewhat timid response to life, as compared to Monisha's unyielding stance, but it is perhaps a more sane, balanced response so far as living is concerned. Desai argued that a compromise like Amia's was perhaps a better alternative for Indian women of those times. "If one is alive in this world, one cannot survive without compromise....It is for heroes and martyrs to say 'the great Yes' or 'the great No' [as Monisha does]", Desai said in 1977, "[but] most of us have not the courage to say either yes or no. We say... 'All right then, if I must...'"(98).

However, this is far from losing the self to external pressures because Amia's choice entails no little struggle. Referring to the more current scenario, Desai observes in 1988 that Indian women "have a life presented to them and they have to make the best of it". They must rebel by way of "exercising whatever control they can within those parameters" ("Against Current" 524). Instead of accepting their lot fatalistically, they may resist patriarchal hegemony by devising new strategies that would help them survive *and* create a niche for themselves. This certainly is no radical feminism, but a little narrative of resistance and self-assurance that may ultimately help them realize their actual potential, long repressed by traditional gender structures.

The concluding part of the novel, "Mother", presents a pattern of Indian femininity that not only runs counter to the preceding two but shocks "normal" sensibilities by its extreme subversion of patriarchal morals in our society. Otima is an iconoclast in her conception of womanhood. In a culture which once celebrated sati and still appreciates, if not prescribes, a life of austerity for widows, she feels freed at the death other husband and carries on with Major Chadha. In a country, which idealizes the mother while denigrating the wife, she rejects her children—literally or symbolically. Living alone in her home in Kalimpong, "a secluded paradise", Otima stands "free" (201). Having once given them life, she now deals her children death. It is almost a literal death in Monisha's case because the mother fails to come

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to the aid of her traumatised daughter, and a metaphoric death in Nirode's case as she turns absolutely indifferent to him near the novel's end (Mann 168).

Otima makes her first appearance in the novel after Monish'a death. The narrative links her with Goddess Kali in ways more than one. The hundreds of goddesses worshipped in India down the ages are "but manifestations of an unmanifest Supreme Goddess (Devi, the Great/Eternal Mother), appearing in various guises and exercising a variety of functions""(Klostemaier 156). Kali is but one dimension of this divine feminine. Kali is Shakti, or primal energy. She is *svatantra*, independent, her existence contingent upon nothing extraneous to herself; As the ancient deity of our times, says Ajit Mookerjee, Kali will annihilate the patriarchal universe to reveal the truth of things and restore to us the divine feminine long lost (9). Significantly enough, the direct identification between Otima and Kali is made by Nirode, the chief male character in the novel and therefore "a representative of the masculine principle Otima-Kali threatens" (Mann 168). As he drives his mother through the city, he "sees" the sky darkening and the people putting on lights in her honour He hears them wail and chant, and knows "at once then, that she is Kali" (255). Otima is an overwhelming presence to Nirode, a being to whom, he, to borrow words from Sudhir Kakar, finds himself "in danger of ceding both genitals and the self {*Intimate Relations* 143).

The portrayal of Otima connects the physical and the social with the metaphysical and me mythical. As Nirode says, she is "night and day, light and dark. She is not merely good, she is not merely evil—she is good *and* she is evil (italics mine). She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached, she is everything from which we will always be detached. She is reality and illusion, she is the world and she is *maya*". Otima reconciles life's contraries. "Isn't it perfect and inevitable that she should pour blood into our veins when we are born, and drain it from us when we die9" asks Nirode. To Amia's protest that she is "Mother... that is all", he replies:

"Mother, mother—Kali is the mother of Bengal, she is the mother of us all... .She is our consciousness and she is our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest..." (256). As if to confirm Nirode's assessment, the novel ends with a procession celebrating the goddess, potentially signifying the emergence of the new (Indian) woman who is the arbiter of her own world. The image of the archetypal female is here appropriated to create an alternative image of woman as an autonomous being bold enough to accept, and present herself with, all her complexities and contradictions.

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Insofar as Kali is the symbol of woman's latent sexuality and power, the radical Otima has the potential for subversive action by maintaining her sexual independence in her marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. Deconstructing the stereotypes of selfless mother and submissive wife, as it were, she challenges the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society. Seeking fulfilment in unfettered solitude, Otima prepares to divest herself of all bonds. A symbol for both life and death, she attains "that consummate wisdom besides which all others were incomplete, aborted beings" (254). David Kinsley notes that "to meditate on the dark goddess... is to step out of the everyday world of predictable dharmic order and enter a world of reversals, opposites, and contrasts and in doing so to wake up to new possibilities and new frames of? reference" (130). In her portrayal of Otima as Kali, Desai overturns the ideal representation of the Indian woman as a self- effacing being.

Desai's Calcutta, on one level, is a city of tumult and turpitude, darkness and death, inhabited by "the half-dead and the half-alive" (8, 92). It is also a mute witness to women's subjugation and oppression. On another level, the city is a site of the struggle one undertakes to earn one's bread and identity. Calcuttans are "capable of responding to passion with passion, to sorrow with sorrow" (238). Monisha may have been forced to live a cloistered life, but before her death, paradoxically, she cannot help appreciating the throb of life that runs through the streets of Calcutta. Home to Goddess Kali, Calcutta hardly ever accepts a mood of defeat. It is a city of protest and revolutionary consciousness. The novel's ending reinforces this image by fusing Otima with Kali.

In Voices in the City we have a plurality of independent and unmerged voices. The novel's title is all too significant in this respect. Against the dominant discourse of men are pitted the "voices" of self-conscious women. This literary mode indulges in the flouting of authority and inversion of social hierarchies by profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct. Again, the female voices achieve their full significance not only in their dialogic interaction with the male voices but also with each other. It is difficult to choose between the paradigms of female identity as presented in the last three parts of the novel. These voices each have their own legitimacy and are therefore not only opposed but irreconcilable, with the result that the work remains open-ended. They can be seen as multipronged resistance to male orthodoxy.

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Within to Without by Kirti Singh Delhi. Impromptu, B-17, 2nd Floor, Lajpat Nagar Part 2, Price: Rs 120 Pages: 81

The celebrated English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelly, defined poetry as the 'expression of imagination'. Poetry need not portray life as it is, rather it should reach out into the realm of the imagined, and represent life as it should be and could be. Some would say that it is hard to find poets who could match Shelly's exacting standards, but even so there has seldom been any dearth of acolytes whose preferred way of expressing their imagination is verse. The poetic art of 'expressing the imagination' is as old as history itself.

In ancient times poetry had a much important role to play. It was the mnemonic device by which people could remember their prayers or even historical, geographical, medical and other kinds of knowledge. One reason why the ancients always composed in metre and rhythm is because it enabled them to easily memorize what they had compiled. In a sense, for the ancients the verses served as books, the retainers of knowledge, which could then be passed on from person to person and eventually down to posterity. In fact much that is known about the pre-historic times has come down to us through verses passing by word of mouth from generation to successive generation. The ancient historical and religious texts like *the Ramayana, the Mahabharata* and *Shrimad Bhagwatam* as also the texts from a western civilization, like the *Iliad and Odyssey,* were all composed in verses flowing with rhythm and metre so that they could be easy to remember.

In the modern age poetry has lost much of its relevance as the preferred compendium of all human knowledge, which in any case can be stored more reliably in books, papers, CDs computer hard drives, etc. Poets no longer have to compose in a rhythmic style, which would make their verses easy to remember. And that might be the reason why it is becoming increasingly rare to find a modern poet writing in metre and rhythm. Poetry has evolved. Writing us metre and rhythm is no longer *au fiat.* Poets are now free to 'express their imagination' in any way they choose. So, devoid of metre and rhythm, has modern poetry started sounding more and more like

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prose? On rare occasions, one does come across prose works so eloquent that their texts flow almost like the rendition of good poetry. But the fundamental dividing line between prose and poetry still exists. Poetry is more abstract than anything prose can be. More importantly, to bring verse into being, a poet must let his/her mind soar in the surreal atmosphere of poetic imagination, whereas a prose-writer's oeuvre is mostly the product of more mundane thinking.

Now about the book under review, *Within to Without* by Kirti Singh, who, like most modern poets, pays only lip service to the rigors of rhythm and metre. But, on the other hand the wealth of attention that she pays to the nuances of sound and symbol is enough to make her verses assonate and resonate to the tunes of the myriad emotions that she seeks to portray.

Written in a style that is cryptic, condensed, sensuous, the poems come as a casting off of the veil from the various issues that form the alpha and omega of day-to-day living. The poems thrive in portraying emotions that in some quaint way expose the hidden beauty of the world and by throwing a new light on life's most common trivialities and paint a picture that is bright and beautiful.

In composing her poems, Kirti Singh deftly avoids the temptation of being esoteric and incomprehensible, pitfalls that have consumed may good poets, and the sheer simplicity and lucidness in her style makes the poems an absolute delight to read. In addition to all that, the most superlative quality in the poems seems to come from the author's perception of the world as a happy place. The leitmotif of the poems is abounding optimism—carpe diem.

This is how the verse in the beginning of the book goes:

> The Kaleidoscope of emotions dazzles me
> The riotous array of pleasures enslaves me
> The bejewelled noose of love ensnares me
> The beauty of the pictures,
> flashed onto the epidiascope of my life,
> enraptures me.

If anything, it is the poet's *joie de vivre* that these lines subsume. Even when the poetry is about a tragic circumstance like a funeral, as in the poem titled "Funeral Charades", Kirti Singh does not fail to bring some brightness to the drab-dreary atmosphere of pathos. A very short poem runs along these lines:

> Take my advice—
> Die only once

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and not so frequently.
Lest it be that when
death finally comes
she finds herself cheated
at finding a mummified corpse.

The concept in those lines might be familiar, but by the cryptic way of putting it, the queasy electric power of those few lines comes across as entirely novel. When it comes to combining metrical patterns with complex ideas, Kirti Singh is undoubtedly at her best. In a poem titled 'A Beauty of Promises' she writes:

Why are the unfurled buds
so much more beautiful
than flowers already bloomed?

Because they hold promises
allure of riches to come.
And bloomed flowers
are disappointing,
because they have
belied those promises
laid waste to a precious life
which could have
become a
jewel.

The title of the book *Within to Without* is significant. In the view of this reviewer, it signifies a sort of outpouring of the joys, hopes, fears, frustrations, the range of emotions that were always there 'within' the mind but needed the medium of poetry to bring out, to be finally expressed on paper a that went on to become a book. In the Preface, Kirti Singh writes, "what started as an emotional trampoline for me is now presented to you as a compilation so that reading it you can share the joy I had writing it all. Here is a toast to this rich life—a life to be lived fully, vibrantly...."

Kirti Singh's kind of poetry might have a lot to offer to our high-speed culture, which has more and more people tending to believe that their happiness depends on what they own and what they can spend. The important message from her poems is that ultimately all emotions originate from within, external stimuli have a very minute role to play.

Anoop Verma

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An Aesthetic Assessment of Bihu Songs /Ramaniyo Bihu Gaan By Susmita Bhattacharya, 2004, Kolkata. Pranoti Publishing House, 170/43, Lake Gardens 45, Pp. 105 Rs 150

The saying 'don't judge a book by its cover' should equally be 'don't judge a book by its title.' *An Aesthetic Assessment of Bihu Songs* is rather an off-putting title that makes this book seem like a dry and academic thesis about songs that are anything but! Bihu songs are full of the vibrancy and joy that one associates with Assam's rich and colourful festivals.

Let me say at the outset that I love such books—bilingual books that promote cultural dialogue. India, with its wealth of regional languages and literatures, needs such books to spread an awareness of its pan-Indian cultural identity. A trilingual book, to also incorporate the original Assamese, would have been even nicer.

Like many Indians I had heard of the Bihu festival and understood that it plays a central role in the rural life of India's north eastern region. But not sharing their language and culture, I could not appreciate the significance of that centrality. So I welcome Susmita Bhattacharya's bilingual book, which goes some way towards fulfilling its aim: "to provide the people of India in general and Bengali—speaking people in particular, the essential informations [sic] about Bihu songs of Assam, the neighbouring State of Bengal, and to make them aware of their aesthetic appeal."

One learns, for instance, that there are three main Bihus in Assam's social and cultural life: Rangali (literally 'colourful') Bihu—a joyous New Year celebration at springtime, Kangali (literally 'impoverished') Bihu—commemorated with prayers for a good harvest and held at a lean time of the year when the fields are bare, and Bhogali (literally 'sensual' earthly pleasures'), Bihu essentially a thanksgiving festival at harvest-time. Each Bihu is a response to the relevant season on the part of a community of farmers and fisherfolk. Songs and dances are a prominent expression of that response.

A long-time admirer of Bihu songs, Dr Bhattacharya had a Bengali book published on the subject in 2000 - *Bihugaaner Tatparya O Nandanik Soundarya.* The book currently under review acknowledges two other important source books: Prafulladatta Goswami's *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs* and Tirtha Phukan's *Bihunamar Tatparya Aru Nandanik.* The Bengali translations are excellent and capture the rhythm of the Bihu songs with an easy fluency; the English translations are often stilted with missing articles, and forced rhymes and half-rhymes. Nevertheless, it does the basic duty of conveying meaning.

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There are translations in both Bengali and English of some of the songs sung in the various Bihu festivals. Of these, Rangali Bihu songs, we are told, are the most spectacular. Love songs—a perennial association in India with the spring – combine with hymns invoking divine blessing at sowing time.

With its seven days of celebration, Rangali Bihu is also the only festival that most non-Assamese identify as being 'Bihu'. I confess this was certainly the case with me. Each of the seven days of Rangali Bihu has its own distinctive name. Thus the first day which falls on the last day of the month of Chaitra is called Goru Bihu ('Cow Bihu') and cows enjoy a fuss being made of them. In the early morning cattle are taken to a river or pond for bathing. They are sprinkled with water, offered particular vegetables and a song is sung:

> Eat bitter gourd, eat brinjal,
> Each year, do grow.
> Father is small, mother is small,
> You'll be a big cow.

On Goru Bihu evenings, cattle are fed with homemade sweets and their horns are decorated with oil and tamarind.

Bihu songs are sung in a simple, rustic language. But if Dr Bhattacharya had given her readers only a translation of sample Bihu songs with no commentary, many of these songs would have remained obscure. Thus the quatrain

> I went to field to harvest paddy
> A sudden storm came up,
> I left the scythe and entered forest,
> Lips were bitten by wasp!

belongs, we learn, to the genre of Jeng Bihu—songs composed by women to express their feelings. The lips "bitten by wasp" convey a delicate hint of a physical relationship! Women dance to these Jeng Bihu songs in a secluded 'Jeng' ('bamboo' in Assamese) grove. Traditional women's activities such as weaving, fishing with *Jakoi* (a kind of bamboo scoop used for catching fish) and gathering edible greens, are mentioned in the Jeng Bihu songs. Here, as in he case of other Bihu songs, Dr. Bhattacharya's commentary is enlightening.

For me, as a poet, a particularly interesting aspect of this book is its introduction to the structure and style of these folkloric songs. The author draws attention to a similarity between the form of Bihu songs and the four-

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line Rubai and the Malaysian Pantoon. There are also the Ai-nitams, haunting songs about the pain of love, a speciality of the Miri or Mising community of Assam. Ai-nitams are couplets, often unrhymed, and contain imagery of beauty and power. Here is one by a desolate lover who has heard that his beloved has become friendly with someone else:

> The banks are eroding with the impact of wild
> waters,
> When I heard of you my heart too eroded.

Some Bihu songs have a dialogue form and are in quatrains; others contain stanzas of varying lengths. In the following extract from a Jeng Bihu, celebrating women's freedom from domestic chores, the dialogue is between a lead singer and a chorus:

> One singer: Chaitra is gone,
> In Baishakh life became free!
>
> All: How did it become free?
>
> One: It was tied very strongly,
> Bihu has made it free!

There is also the example of a Huchari Bihu song of blessing that is performed during Rangali Bihu by bands of male singer-dancers:

> Leader: In the shed, the cows.
>
> All: Let be increased!
>
> Leader: In the shed, buffalows [sic]
>
> All: Let be increased!
>
> Leader: With paddy, the granary
>
> All: Let be stocked!
>
> Leader: For welfare of the host
>
> All: Say-"JayHari"!

It is amusing to note that the Huchari singers make blatant use of the 'leader and chorus' structure of their songs to remind householders to give them

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gifts of *Bara Pitha* (a sweetmeat made from rice), sweet molasses, *gamochha* ('light towels') and sarai (a tray mounted on a leg):

Leader: Baby-elephant's trunk is small

Molasses has been brought for us all.

All: The "Bara Pitha" of Bihu will be
offered!,

Leader: Soft is the flower-petal,
Gamochha along with sarai
will please us all.

All: The "Bara Pitha" of Bihu will be
offered!

Leader : The cords around the "dhol' are loose,
We have fasted since yesterday,
Waistbands have come loose!

All: The "Bara Pitha" of Bihu will be
offered!

One of the most fascinating of these Huchari 'dialogue' songs is that between Shiva (here he is called 'Pagia' – 'the Madman') and his wife Parvati, the role of both being taken by men. As Dr Bhattacharya rightly observes, Pagia and his wife "actually resemble a rustic husband and his wife, rather than a god and a goddess"!

Interesting too is the way in which Bihu songs have captured topical events to create a record of Assam's history, usually as a backdrop to a traditional Bihu love song or a song of separation. Here is a quatrain in the voice of someone who wanted to be a lawyer's assistant (the Assamese word is *'muhuri'*) or a clerk during the British Raj but ended up as a labourer on one of the many tea plantations owned by the British:

I cut my hair in a small cut
Wishing to be a 'muhuri',
I couldn't be muhuri, I couldn't be clerk,
In tea garden I became a coolie.

A song composed after the 1962 Chinese attack on India describes it as a betrayal:

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Northern hills are full of smoke
Smoke smarts the eyes,
Posing as a friend enemy has advanced -
China's Chou-En-Lai!

There are of course parallels between the Bihu festivals and many of the utsavs ('festive celebrations') in other parts of India. There is much in common especially with the festivals of Assam's neighbouring states. The manner in which the Bihu is welcomed at the start of a Bihu festival and bid farewell at its end is reminiscent of what happens at Durga Puja, for instance, in Bengal and elsewhere. But at the same time, the Bihu festivals, with their ancient origins, are a unique phenomenon of Assam.

This is a book to be savoured by anyone interested in India's folksongs. Congratulations to Pranoti Publishing House on bringing this out.

Debjani Chatterjee

The Moon Has Two Faces (Poems), by M. Mohankumar, 2004, New Delhi. Konarak.

Regardless of the changing fashions, theories and preferences, poetry remains to be the desire to get into the truth of the poet's experiences. The form and diction might change, the approach might be different, and techniques might be new; but the driving spirit of the poet is essentially the same restlessness to come to terms with himself and his life. This underlies the axiom that poetry arises from the quarrel with oneself. It is an attempt to discover a new rhythm in the faltering rhythm of daily life. This holds true of the poetry of M. Mohankumar, in his new book, suggestively titled *The Moon has Two Faces*.

The poems in this anthology present a poet with a refined sensibility, a mature vision and greater command on poetic form. There are no attempts to shock the reader with unconventional ideas or unexpected twirls of phrases. If at all he shocks, it is only by the striking simplicity and directness. But behind this simplicity and candour, there is an unmistakable intensity. It is not naiveté, but a directness that comes out of clarity of vision and a subtle sensitivity.

The poems in this volume could be divided into two categories. In

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one set of poems the poet is attempting reinterpretations of experiences and re-evaluations of events. The second and more poignant set of poems capture the resonance of a personal tragedy: the demise of his wife as could be inferred from the dedication. Both categories of poems finally bridge the personal with the universal and carry the poet towards greater clarity and depth. In fact the poems reveal that the poet, like the moon, has two faces, as asserted in the title.

Poetry is for him the 'communion of joy' that transforms ordinary existence as the moon transforms an uninteresting landscape. The same wish to get away from the work-a-day world on the wings of poesy is repeated in poems like "The Concert" and "The Music of Life" besides the title poem. In fact, this love for serenity and calmness persuades the poet to invoke befitting images and a languorous pace, as the poem "Backwaters" amplifies.

> The canoe glides slowly,
> Like the mind upon old memories.....
> Palm-fringed serenity.
> The tumult of the sea inaudible
> In the distance.

This haiku-like quality of un-judgemental observation is a hallmark of much of Mohankumar's poetry. We encounter the same tenor in 'Transparency: Smile/on the painted face.../Dressed window. /Decoy.' Similarly, the poet records 'A crescent moon sails in, /A bright star within its pale. /They rest on my surprised brow. And are gone/. It's dark outside.' *("A Sunset Flight")*.

Memory has always been the favourite haunt of poets. In the sixty poems of this anthology, the poet is almost always hovering in the landscape of memories. He proclaims this candidly in these opening lines.

> These days my thoughts
> Range far and wide:
> Over the past imperfect
> And the present continuous.
> *("These days my thoughts")*

Memories are not about the past alone. They could 'gain a glimpse of the future'. His engagement with memory is more complex than a nostalgic wish to wallow in the past. Sometimes it is a direct statement like 'There is always a village in my mind' ("Native Village"*)*. Sometimes 'memory stirs like a dull pain' 'Island of Tranquility"*)*. Memories come tumbling out of crammed cupboards. Sometimes 'Memories/ like sheep' crowd into the pen.

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There are times when memory is invoked through an objective correlative like The Hurricane Lamp', with 'a smoky flame/burning still/in one corner of the mind.'

Memory is what helps the poet to be in touch with his departed wife, leaving him with 'a house full of things...empty like the broken heart...'and Roses in the terrace, untended, /wilting.' ("What Remains"). The poet grapples with these memories to discover a new perspective and philosophical equanimity in his personal loss. Whatever he sees and experiences after the tragedy —painting the house, evening walk or *vishu* — is a painful reminder of that absence. He might not have discovered the final answers. But his struggles lend a genuine depth and honesty to these poems. In the poem "Journey's End", he asks these succinct questions:

Who knows
When a journey will begin
And where it will end?
Who knows?
The end of one journey:
The beginning of another ...
The beginning
Of a lonely journey
Into the wide unknown.

This phase of grief in the life of the poet has produced some of the finest poems in this anthology, like "The Eyeglasses" and "Coping with Grief."

The poems in this collection clearly show the growth rings of the poet as a student of life. From the stage of 'standing as a celebrant' before the great theatre of the world, the poet has moved on to the stage of philosophical struggles to come to terms with inevitable and sometimes painful change. On the one hand there is the realization that seeking answers is an eternal quest and those who claim to know the answers are also seekers ("Will o' the Wisp") There is stoic acceptance as in the poem "If I were", where the poet recognizes his limitations. The stanzas that begin 'If I were...' only reinforce what he is. While he recognizes that looking back would 'raise the sluice gates of the past, allowing an onrush of memories' ("Coping with Grief"), he also realizes that a flame in a windy spot cannot remain unflickering. And the poet, like Orpheus, looks back; he can't help it. The strength and beauty of this volume arise from this fearless admission of weakness and vulnerability.

Mohankumar is no longer a newcomer to the portal of poetry. This is his fourth collection. Over a brief period of six years since his first anthology, his diction has become suave and sure and the phrases have

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acquired an unmistakable quality of suggestiveness. Deftly juxtaposing opposites, he achieves a rare blend of simplicity and depth. 'Our boys and girls...*know a lot* but *know nothing*.' ("Ancestor Worship"). 'A house *full* of things...*empty* like the broken heart.' (("What Remains"). His images too are a blend of commonplace observations appropriately contextualized. Paddy-fields are like pasted postage stamps. Dreams are to be hugged like a child. There are no strained efforts to impress or produce unusual effects by absurd combination of ideas. The poet's eye is for aptness and elegance which is rather uncommon in much of the poetry written today.

Konark publishers deserve a mention for the beautiful production and layout of this delightful book. It conveys the restrained expressiveness of the poems contained between its covers.

K. Jayakumar

The Love Song of Alfred Hitchcock by Maythil Radhakrishnan. Trans. V.C. Harris, 2004, New Delhi. Indialog, Pp. 140, Rs.195.

This collection of Maythil Radhakrishnan's novellas in English opens up three distinct areas of observation in our times. First and foremost, *The Love Song of Alfred Hitchcock* is appearing at a time when the regional vs Indian writing in English is fundamentally struck on the debate of 'quality literature'. For the Indian English writer, quality writing seems to be something adopted from the western postmodern canon or anything that has some amount of exoticism attached to it. But, for any regional writer who is well aware of the western market tendencies, this may not be the standard quality writing. Secondly, one should notice that this is the time when one discusses the impact and influence of postmodernism in regional writings. In this context, these novellas written in Malayalam share a distinct quality that separates them from the deviant modernism from which Maythil emerged with his novel *Suryavamsam* in the 1970-s. The last if not the least is the reception of this collection in the midst of the English reading Indian public. This again is a problem related to comparison—in other words, how does Maythil's writings share and resonate certain commonalities with other such writings from the regional languages in English translation. By all probabilities, the translator, V.C.Harris, knew this third aspect when he writes in the Introduction to *The Love Song of Alfred Hitchcock* that Maythil brings to "bear upon

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his work a special quality of literary imagination that is quite rare in Indian fiction." As the three novellas in this collection would show, this specific charm in Indian fiction brackets off any diehard distinction between the regional and the national.

A reader's game rather than a language puzzle! This is the best way to describe these novellas. One unique feature that unites these novellas is the creation of 'inter-texts'. These inter-texts carry a load of cultural and historical elements. They have in them the pathos of the deprived, the transitory pleasures of the middle class, the confusions of average man and woman and a quest, which gradually opens them to endless repetition of meanings. This phase definitely is postmodern; yet it shares something which modernism has left out—a nostalgia of the past. However, this nostalgia is least romantic in its displaying of its features. It develops through the 'reading of characters' (not character-reading) especially through the decentred protagonists like Nakulan, Arati and Relanki/Nagi. This curious display of nostalgia raises confusions in the narratives of Maythil since it problematises the nature of inter-texts in the novellas. Progressing more from the intertextual devices of Jorge Luis Borges and the language games and alternative reading strategies of Julio Cortazar and Georges Perec, these narratives qualitatively dump their inter-texts on the pedestal for deferred interpretations. This should be considered as a conscious political act of the writer and it should not be misjudged as a strategy at all.

What arrests the sensation of readers going through these narratives is the narrow demarcation between the computer language and the innate human language. In "The Love Song of Alfred Hitchcock" the central puzzle is centered on this language game. The murder mystery, which is central to this novella, weaves around three specific topos—the computer genius Nakulan's (mis) representations, the recollections about John (the dead husband of Mary) and the impossibility of a love relationship between Nakulan and Mary. Hitchcock constantly appears in the narrative creating palpable turning-ins and offs. Hitchcock is both invoked as a means to solve the riddle and as a necessity for the supposed completion of the narrative. Bearing very much on the genre of suspense and thrillers, Hitchcock's troubled indirect interventions in the narrative, no less, creates a wonderful cinematic impact here. Nakulan's confession to Emily that "I don't venture to understand anything that a computer cannot understand" limits the spatial liminality of the human language. Yet language has its divergent potentialities. When the story veers towards the *chakyar koothu* and the plight of the dancing girls from Kerala temples, this language makes a return, perhaps nostalgically, to distance us from the limitations and ends of a computer game. Hitchcock's intervention or John's murder can better be understood in this culture-

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specific connotation. Paradoxically, this indicates the failure of a cosmopolitan system of governance.

The second novella "Hitchcock's Intervention" extends this idea to the direct reference of an agency in the story. In this story, Hitchcock directly intersects (to use the term consciously) in the inter-connected networks of the plot. For example, every sub section in this novella is an attempt to patch a compromise with the Hitchcockian films. The story of Amarnath and Gayatri becomes a drama enacted in the minds of the investigators. The role of the investigator, as in an Agatha Christie novel, does not affix the 'whodunit' here. In a subtle and clever way, the plot of the 'unicorn dreaming' unwinds the peculiar energy for Arati to decipher Amarnath's poems. Arati's own meditations upon the murder committed (the visual in Hitchcock's films) encourage her to pull the trigger. Unlike the previous novella, the cinematographic shots intertwined in the language of the story makes Maythil's autodidactic relationship with Hitchcock complete here. What the story cannot tell, Hitchcock speaks out.

The third novella "Music Is A Time-Art", unlike the previous novellas creates a system of oppositions. Primarily, this system of oppositions is grounded on the concept of time. The linear and circular concepts of time come in conflict here. Centred on the pathos of Basava Kannad who has to play the role of a corpse in the film *The Guest of Corpses*, the story makes the intertextual references to Browning's poetry, bucolic plague that ravaged parts of London and Mozart's music. A whole course of history is powerfully invoked here; but, alas, the connections to certain micro historical conjunctions are lost. For example, this story, heavily drawn on the regional topographies and the systems of Indian music, could have played more of a politically corrective role by depicting the histories of the early singers of films and their notions of music. The journey motif in this narrative serves the best function of a search of places. It is through this, that Maythil's autobiographical accounts themselves have acted more as the text for this story. But this is a journey towards what? Is this a journey in search of music, is still a doubtful question unanswered.

In the translation of these novellas into English, V.C.Harris has faithfully retained the linguistic exuberance of Maythil. The English reading, therefore, would never create any jarring impression in the readers. One of Harris's statements that Maythil never considered O.V.Vijayan's *Khasakhinte Ithihasam* (*The Legends of Khasakh*) as the 'be all and end-all' of all fictions in Malayalam is very doubtful. In one of Maythil's interviews, he has revealed that after the publication of Vijayan's novel, he thought for certain that only Vijayan should write in Malayalam because only he could really break the language from its rusty bars. This is a very intensely subjective statement. In

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the ongoing serialized biography titled *Vettakkoru Makan* appearing in the *Kalakaumudi* weekly, Maythil claims that magic realism was the invention of the German writer Gunter Grass, and that Garcia Marquez only took its credit (This particular statement appeared in an interview). A gross error to come out from the mouth of a sensible writer. Such problematised statements of Maythil can obfuscate the intentions of his oeuvre. Keeping aside these contemporary confusions in writings and thought, this English translation of Maythil's novellas offers a futuristic glance at short story/novella as a genre. The left out 'unfinished agenda of modernism' is translated by Maythil to create the power plugs of a postmodern era. If Maythil departs from his two other strong contemporaries (N.S.Madhavan and K.P.Nirmal Kumar), it is at this juncture. This collection would stamp a new space before all readers of Indian regional translations as Hitchcock follows his victims for further investigations and experiments.

Krishnanunni. P.

Translation as Recovery by Sujit Mukherjee, Edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee and Introduction by Harish Tirivedi, New Delhi. Pencraft International, Pp. 208, Rs. 380/-

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Translation is perceived as expression of a sense, word, sentence, speech, book etc. in another language. Transcreation goes a step further and enables further improvement for better understanding by the reader, as it is "creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work". The word 'transcreation' has been in practice in India, especially with reference to the mass of literature, which the author calls Indo-English creative writing. Diversity of languages is our security, durability and unity, as the author emphasises. There is a long tradition of translation in India, as the author rightly points out (p 44): "that we were engaged in literary translation at least for the last 1000 years and that our poets and playwrights and story-tellers have quite freely drawn" from other Indian sources to compose poems, plays and stories in their languages and that most often the source, has been Sanskrit. The most sourced language was Sanskrit and' the most targetted texts were *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana*. The results were *Pampa Bharata* by Pampa, in Kannada (10th century), *Kamba Ramayana* of Kamban in Tamil (11th century), *Vilanka Ramayana* of Sarala Dasa in Oriya (14th century), and

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of different versions of' *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana* in different Indian languages. Translation and transcreation have helped in the promotion of literature to a great extent, especially in the multi-cultural and plural society in our country. The author also elaborates that we do not have a widely-accepted word for translation and that when we admired a literary text in one language, we composed a similar text in another language, and this is what is meant by transcreation. While we did translations all through centuries, we do not have theories of translation: the author surmises, "we forgot to stop (translation) and theorise"(p 36). But the need for theorising is imperative and it is this gap that the author has eminently bridged.

While translation from English to Indian languages and vice versa are common, it is not so from one Indian language to the other as the author has rightly pointed out. Erudition of the author clearly comes out the book in understanding the history of both translations and transcreations in post-Independent India. It places the processes in perspective, and traces the rationale and milieu of the works. The efforts made by the author are commendable as he meticulously compares and analyses the translations of the same work by different translators, which clearly indicates the enormous efforts of the author. Translation is proximal to an art and such an exposition renders the variety that a text could offer in translation to a reader. More than that, the various points of view of appreciation and comprehension of an original work by different translators is a matter that at times baffles a reader. But literature is all about evocation and interpretation of silences and the ripples that a literary work creates in the mind of a reader.

The book is a sequel to the earlier volume of the author, *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translations* (1981). There are 17 essays and reviews in the book, in four Sections: viz., "Anuvad - Vivad," 2. "Rabindranath (Tagore) in English," 3. "Reviewing Translation," and 4. "Translation as Recovery: an Exercise". All issues relating to translations, and comments on the variety of translations are handled in an engaging style that is academically educative and lucid for a common man. It is in the first part of the book comprising six essays on the theory and practice of translation that the author comes out at his brilliant best. The second part, "Rabindranath in English" present the reader with some rare and brilliant insights of the great and multi-faceted personality of the first Indian Nobel laureate. The third part consists of reviews of translations. The last part is what the author considers, perhaps as a model of transcreation, from Budeb Mukhopadhyaya's "History of India as revealed in a Dream" 1862) as an exercise of translation as recovery. However, this exercise does not compare well with the other essays, studies and theories, in that it simply

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did not appeal and make a sample of a model and excellent example, to this reviewer. It does not emulate beyond the level of an exercise of school/ college textbook exercise. Perhaps, the piece selected was not just right and worthy of such trouble on the part of the author. It would have been better without this piece, in an otherwise erudite book, which is of perpetual value on translation and related aspects. Other chapters are all-encompassing and cover the whole spectrum of literatures in all Indian languages, though there is predominance on Bengali literature. It is not a flaw, but strength of the book, as most of them had translations in other Indian languages and have the universality that one expects in great literature. Before English came in and became the language of governance, there were translations from Sanskrit, Prakrit and Pali in the first few centuries of the Christian era. Later, there were from Persian. Persian continued to be the language of gracious composition and useful translation for quite some time and even now there are translations of Persian classics coming out e.g., *Sadeq Hidayat* (original was published in India) and Omar Khayyam. Two thousand books in Persian were published in India during the 19th century. Later, with the advent of English and the colonial times, the areas of translation grew and prospered: translation of Indian texts into English and English language texts into Indian languages. The English who ruled India first cultivated Hindi and Urdu and Bangla and Marathi. Later, translation of language texts from one to another also grew. What was earlier a spontaneous literary activity grew into a force of new nationalism, which was later strengthened by Sahitya Akademi and National book Trust. Later, there was a kind of foreign aid from Russia and America, to translate their books into regional languages. But this patronage stopped and subsequently, Sahitya Akademi and National book trust took upon the task, and the author rightly raises a concern, (p26) whether this would be completed in the near future and whether the efforts would meet with success marketing. However in flawed the systems are (Favourites flock for crumbs), translation has moved centre-stage with publishers, seminarists, reviewers and all concerned.

The author correctly places in perspective the concerns of language translations into English and the attitude of the translators. They "give the impression that they know better than the original authors, hence their efforts are so creative that such translations should be looked upon more as an art than as a craft". Sometimes, English expressions may not be adequate to express the nuances of Indian languages, and the translators interfere with the original text in various ways, of course with the desire of improving upon the original: they also "convince themselves that they are doing a favour to the Indian language writer by presenting him or her to a wider world"(p 41). Translation, the author emphasises, is more of a craft, than an art and

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his conviction is correct and convincing. The condescending attitude of the English writers/translators does harm to the works, as he or she does not pay much heed to the original text.

Translation is a major activity in Indian publishing, especially after the mid-80s. Practically every English language publisher is building a list of translations as rapidly as possible. It is because language is one of our greatest wealth and translation enables us to continue to speak or write or read to each other. Paperbacks have gained a thrust in India when major international publishing houses set up Indian companies. However, it is debatable as to how many of the Penguin India publications, for example, stand the test of literary standards and values, as they also turn out a large amount of dubious stuff. However, this has resulted in a fecundity of translations and better deal for the authors. While translations from languages flourish, there are also instances, as pointed out by the author, where under the UNESCO, such works failed to get publishers in England.

The Section on Rabindranath in English provides deep insight on the translations of the great writer and the meticulous style of analysis of the author. Discrepancies between the originals and the translated versions have been brought out, by comparing different translations. Seven translations of "Urvashi" have been appended, and they speak for themselves. The enormity of injustice done by Tagore to Amiya Chakravarti (p 108) is inexplicable as it is unforgivable." Behind Tagore's translation of novels there are "varied circumstances and multiple motivations." The author also correctly evaluates the position of Tagore as an original English poet and as the most translated Indian author.

The reviews in Section III are all of translated books in various genres. The comment (Chapter 17, p 171) starts with, "on a Sunday morning two or three weeks ago," which, in an otherwise flawless book, is an editorial lapse! It is a comment on the review of the Jnanpith Award-winning Oriya writer Gopinath Mohanty, where the author is anguished about an introduction on an eminent litterateur. If one reads through the Sunday magaziens of national newspapers, it is now impossible to find any book review—leave alone the introduction!

K. Kunhikrishnan

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Culture Studies : Theems & Perspectives. Edited by Chandra Kumar Sharma, Tezpur, North Eastern Archival Centre for Traditional Art and Folklore, Tezpur University, Assam. Rs. 300/-

Is not the distance between a topic like "Structuralism: An Introduction" on the one hand and "Authenticity and Tradition: Reappraising a 'Folk' Form" on the other or, for that matter, between "Conflict of Tradition and Social Change: A case Study in Kenya" on one hand and "Literature as a Form of Art: An Indian Perspective" on the other, staggeringly long to be contained in a single file? A question to this effect was put to this reviewer by a learned professor who had borrowed from him the compilation under notice.

The comment implied in his question cannot be set aside lightly and the question had been obviously anticipated by the editor who claims that care had been taken "to ensure that this endeavour does not make the volume look like a compilation of essays on disparate, arbitrary themes. Rather, every effort has been made to maintain an essential uniformity underlying the themes of the volume."

The conscientious editor's efforts notwithstanding, several of the essays presented in the volume are conspicuously autonomous in their scopes and the only glimmer of light that shows the diverse scholarships as an organized entity is the well-thought-out title of the collection: *Culture Studies: Themes & Perspectives.* A lot can go under this, uncontested.

But there is no reason for the editor to feel apologetic about this freedom for diversity between the two covers. Where can we expect that freedom if not in an academic publication? Once in a while we should have fares that are intellectually stimulating and in a bunch of fifteen essays if a reader can find five that are of his or her interest, the anthology stands justified.

Some of the papers are highly informative, the first one on Structuralism for example. The author calls it an introduction to the subject, but it is much more than that; it is a substantial presentation of the ideas and their application concerning the theory. Some of the essays stand out by a touch of reflective originality of their authors, while being sufficiently informative. Prafulla Chandra Kar's "Aesthetics of Modernism" that starts with defining modernity and modernism - the difference in their connotations concludes with this notable statement:

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> I began my essay with some reflection on the notion of formalism in modernist aesthetics and tried to explain how this notion was predicated on the premise that a work of art ultimately ends with a formal closure when all the apparent discrepancies in it are straightened out and coherence is achieved. I am ending with the suggestion that the coherence that is achieved within the textual boundary of a work is only an expression of a desire for a completed act, which is never fully satisfied. That is why, the ending that the modernists talk about is never confined within the linguistic parameters of a particular text, but remains an imagined possibility for a grand narrative that encompasses the whole range of experience.

Hiren Gohain's "Marxism and Literature: An Elementary Introduction" is an interesting defence of an attitude that held sway till the other day — not spontaneously though — over a vast section of writers. However, to claim that in the literary creative process the content choosing its form is a Marxist doctrine, is to assert exclusive rights on a truism. The doctrine is as old as literature itself.

Gohain's defence of the Marxian maxim that "it is not consciousness that determines social being, but social being that determines consciousness" has inevitably grown mellower than the assertions to that effect made by the champions of Socialist Realism of an earlier generation and one wonders if the defensive interpretation given to the doctrine — making it at least partially acceptable by many — would have found endorsement from the genre of his more aggressive and conservative compatriots, if any of them were around.

Roma Chatterji's "Authenticity and Tradition: Reappraising a 'Folk' Form", sheds light on the problems facing the quest for the genuine in the folk culture. Can a folk dance be certified authentic when it is presented before an audience outside its milieu? The author candidly discusses the dilemma underlying the "effort to both preserve and innovate tradition."

Barring four or five essays that are rather weak, the articles in the volume are rich for their analytical properties and some of them for their contemporary relevance.

Manoj Das

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The Alphabet of Birds. Trans. & Edited by Sitakant Mahapatra, 2003, Delhi. NBT., Pp. 75, Rs. 50/-

Seeking refuge at the lotus-feet of the Lord Jagannath is all that the poets selected for this volume do, poem after poem. They know they are miserable, destitute, poor, deprived, and that the only salvation lies in surrendering themselves completely to the Lord Jagannath. This genre of poems, the devotional songs which were composed in Oriya in praise of the Lord Jagannath, the icon of Oriya culture, over six centuries, i.e. from the fifteenth century till date, are multi-hued. Originally meant to be sung, these creations contained all the riches of poetry. Here, imagination plays a strong role. But as they were meant to be sung in particular ragas, imagination was bound to be harnessed. So, this rich play of abandon and restrain has created a tradition of metaphysical Oriya poetry which is firmly embedded in the psyche of common Oriya people. The compiler and translator of this volume, Sitakant Mahapatra, has tried to render those poem-songs in to English.

Mahapatra has selected 19 poets ranging from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. Of them, the most interesting one is Saria Vika who is represented by a lone poem, the only poem he is said to have written. And that poem is perhaps the most popular one. Not much is known about this poet except that he was supposed to be a destitute beggar. Composed in Raag Khamana, the poem "O My Tired Mind" begins thus:

O' the tired mind,
Let's go and see his round eyes
And wash ours
In the conch's navel.

On the way
The road-side goddess Mangala
The eighteen sluice gates
The different minds
Shall be gathered together
And take bath in the tank Narendra.

All through this collection the addressee remains the same, yet the approaches are varied. So also the comparisons. In one poem the Lord Jagannath has been compared with an elephant:

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O intoxicated fearsome elephant
Of the Blue Mountain,
Come and trample
The lotus forest of my sorrow.

What is most striking about the comparison here is "the lotus forest" with sorrow. Elucidating further on this point, Mahapatra says in the Introduction, "Jagannath' s feet are lotus feet. In medieval love-poetry the naika's eyes are also compared to lotus. It is, however, very unusual to compare sorrow to lotus in full bloom and that to not one or two but a whole forest! What is the colour of sorrow? Is it the colour of lotus? How far removed indeed in this imagery of lotus standing for purity and/or love!" It should speak of the power of poetry in the hands of the devotees of the Lord Jagannath. This happy marriage of religious fervour with the flavour of poetry has been responsible in producing a body of Bhakti poetry not just in Orissa but all over India. A.K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva* is certainly a pioneering work in this field, which seems to be a determing factor here in that Sitakant Mahapatra has been inspired to render a difficult body of metaphysical Oriya poetry into contemporary English free verse.

Like Ramanujan, Mahapatra is a poet, translator and a scholar. Mahapatra's s introduction to this collection would initiate outside readers to the time, life and work of the poet-devotees. The title *The Alphabet of Birds* is taken from Jagannath Dasa (1490-1550)'s poem "The Sun is His Two Eyes." Here are a few lines from this poem:

The clouds are his hair
The evening his true clothes.

Prakrit is his heart
And his mind, the moon.

The birds are his alphabet
The *manus* his intelligence

His nest the human body
Woven out of everything illusory.

These poems that Sitakanta Mahapatra has rendered into English are in fact a challenge for every Oriya poet/translator to do it his or her way so that one day the best of it will be out, for these are the songs that constitute the bed-rock of Oriya sensibility.

Rabindra K Swain

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Who Lives Where & Other Poems by Ganga Prasad Vimal, 2004, Kolkata. Writers Workshop, Pp.107, Rs. 150/- (hardback), Rs. 100/-(flexiback) respectively.

Once when T.S. Eliot was asked what was the essential function of modern poetry, he paused, and quipped, "It takes up less space." Eliot was neither outrageous nor light-hearted. Talking about the function of poetry, he in fact pinned down the very core of modern poetry without much rigmarole. Clearly enough his hint was at the economy of words which the poets of his ilk, Pound and others, aimed in their verse keeping away from frills. Ganga Prasad Vimal, a major voice in Hindi literature, caught this spirit of the age as his austere lines reveal an exceptional caution in the choice of words. "When words fail to give out images," he warns, "they are reduced to hypocrisy." He adds: "If they are arbitrarily employed, it is like forcing nothingness into nothingness."

Vimal's forte is of course criticism an" fiction which with an impressive corpus of thirty-five books-fairly outweighs his poetic ouevre. He has authored four books of poems from which selection has been made for the present translation into English. His poems have also been translated into various other world languages quite as he himself rendered into Hindi poetry from various parts of the globe.

In some seventy poems of this anthology, Vimal offers a wide range of themes extending from literature to nature and the ebb and flow of the mind to spiritual quest. The poems are short, mostly a page-long, intense and argumentative. The economy of words reinforce the vigour of directness. There are a few long poems too like "My Village". But the poet is at his fragmentary best. A characteristic poem is "Flag-ism" that develops along striking symbols:

In all eyes
There is an expectancy.
Someone will arrive
With a flag,
And create a paradise for as.

We waited,
But the brimming rivers
Disappeared into sandy banks.

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The poet painfully reflects over the silent celerity of time that is fast gushing into the past disallowing to arrive at a definite milestone: "I have been walking for years/ and have got nowhere." ("Destination") His exploration through unconventional imagery and symbols is to crystallise the implications of this credo. Mourning the wasted time, he finds the latter synonymous with success:" and so success slips away/ like Time when still-folded." ("The Torment of Knowledge").The self-searching prolongs in a cool and rational manner till he short-circuits its his debate in the poem, "The Search" :

"Where am I ?
I ?
I
ask myself
where
am
I?"

Vimal gives credit to the readers for new perceptions of imagery. He pleads that the images changed because the readers recreated them. One should reach out beyond silence and purity to discover harmony, order and meaning in words. The poet clarifies:

If words are leaves,
then meanings are not roots.
If you consider the whole of eternity,
something is bound to change —
as with the past, so it will be for the future."
("Apprehension")

Perfection in form draws more on talent and in-born skill than labour. The poet asks his readers to ponder over this issue and find themselves if:

"there is a difference between a natural shape
and laboured craftsmanship.
Whatever is being written
with the help of Words
is a repetition of meaning."
(" Shapes Beyond Meaning")

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Vimal is fortunate to have half a dozen translators to, what he calls, transcreate from the original Hindi. They are Raj Bisaria, Brenda Walker, V.K. Joshi, Vinod Seth, Patricia Stone and Michael Standen. In translating some of the poems, the poet has also himself collaborated. Powerfully translated, the poems must enjoy a wide readership.

Manohar Bandopadhyay

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh; New Delhi, Ravi Dayal Publisher; Pp. 403, Rs 350/- Distributed by Orient Longman.

The most distinctive feature of Amitav Ghosh's novels is their multilayered structure. An anthropologist by profession, his interests range from history and current events to folk myths all of which he re-interprets and weaves together in his novels. As a result, they are fascinating for the discriminating reader who is willing to go deep into them. However, the casual reader who is looking for an easy read, tends to find them much too scholarly for his/her taste.

The Hungry Tide, his latest work, is set in the Sunderbans, a maze of floating islands covered with mangroves(known as 'sundri' trees in Bangla, after which the region takes its name), an area fraught with danger. The lurking tiger in the jungle and the harmless-looking but deadly crocodile in the water, not to mention the severe cyclonic storms that cause havoc from time to time, make it unfit for habitation. Yet fisherfolk live there and eke out a living from the sea. Piya, an American of Bengali origin, comes to this place in search of dolphins which she studies as a cetologist. On her way she meets Kanai, a suave and worldly-wise translator who is headed for the same place to meet his aunt who runs an NGO there.

The contrast between the two makes their interaction all the more interesting, especially when Fokir, the illiterate fisherman with a thorough knowledge of the region especially the sea, comes into the picture. Opposites attract they say. Piya takes Fokir's help while looking for dolphins and the proximity(despite the language barrier) brings them close to the extent that he dies in an attempt to save her during a cyclone. Just before his death there is a moment of closeness, evocatively described by Ghosh. To quote, "Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact

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of everything hitting him... it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one."

In keeping with the theme and mood, the novel is divided into two parts- "The Ebb -:Bhata" and "The Flood- Jowar." The lines just quoted are from the second part where emotions rise to a crescendo in keeping with the mood of nature. Ever the keen anthropologist, Ghosh has made an intensive study of this region which, he says, is not named after the sundri tree but after a tide 'bhati.' To quote, "This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name 'tide country' is not just right but necessary."

The elemental factor in the novel is very powerful and it overwhelms all the characters. The step-by-step description of the storm in which Fokir loses his life, is an example. Yet nature is not malevolent- it brings Fokir and Piya together, something that manmade stratified society never would. Living in accordance with the norms set by nature is the only option in such environs and the fisherfolk abide by it. Feelings run very deep in such conditions. Even Kanai who appears to be too self-centred and frivolous to care for anyone, seems changed by the end of the novel. Fokir's death can be taken as the catalyctic agent that changes perceptions considerably and Piya recalls "the promises she had made to him, in the silence of her heart, and how, in those last moments, with the wind and the rain still raging around them, she had been unable to do anything for him other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips." Under the adverse circumstances even this would have required a tremendous effort.

It is possible that readers might find that detailed descriptions of Piya's equipment and dolphin behaviour impedes the free flow of the narrative and detracts from the readability of the book. However, most of Ghosh's works are meant for the reader willing to make a cerebral effort to delve deep into them. In this case, since Piya is a cetologist and studies dolphins, a detailed description of dolphin behaviour as well as her equipment add to the authenticity of the novel.

This is enhanced by another real but, by now almost forgotten, incident in the core of the novel—the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Marichjhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. The theme of immigration, sometimes voluntary, sometimes forced, along with its bitter-sweet experiences, runs through most of Ghosh's works, and one relates to it no matter where one is located geographically. There are other themes and sub-plots, all of which cannot be taken up in the course of this review.

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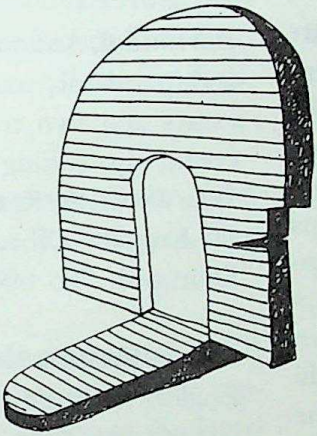
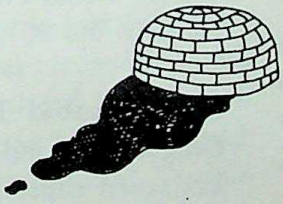
A word about Ghosh's style. Many Indians writing in English experiment with the language to suit their story. Ghosh also does it, using Bangla words like mohona, bhata and others, interweaving them with local myths like that of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jangali, the presiding deities of this region. One last word. A recent review of *The Hungry Tide* says that it owes more to Marquez than to Manik Bandopadhyay and is by implication, less 'Indian'. Manik Bandopadhyay was a great writer and his own experiences gave his works a unique richness. To expect that kind of intensity from someone born much after 1947, would not be fair.

Purabi Panwar

❑





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Das, Manoj (b.1934) Well-known novelist, short-story writer and children's writer; writes in both Oriya and English; has more than 50 books to his credit; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award, Sarala Award, Vishuva Milan Award, Sahitya Bharati Award, Saraswati Samman etc. Add: C/o Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education, Pondicherry 605002.

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Gohain, Hiren (b.1939) Eminent Assamese critic, also writes in English; has more than 20 published works to his credit including, *Asamiya Jatiya Jivanata Mahapurushiya Parampara* which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award. Add: Qtr. No. 18, Gauhati University Campus, Guwahati 781 014, Assam.

Ibopishak, Thangjam Manipuri poet; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry collection, *Bhoot Amasung Maikhum*; teaches Manipuri at G.P. Women's College, Imphal. Add: Wangkhei Thangjam, Leikai, Imphal 795 001, Manipur.

Jayakumar, K. Malayalam poet, translator and acclaimed film lyricist; has recently published a book of poetry in English, *Seduction of the Soul*; a Civil Servant by profession. Add: R-62, Nivedita Kunj, Sector X, R.K. Puram, New Delhi 110 022.

Jhaveri, Dileep (b.1943) Gujarati poet and translator; has one poetry collection to his credit. Add: 301, Waldorf, Hiranandani Estate, Patliputra, Ghodbunder Road, Thane 400 607, Maharashtra.

Kanaka, Halkere Manjunatha (b.1964) Kannada poet and actress. Has two collections of poetry to her credit. Add: D/409, Inlaks Park, Yari Road, Versova, Andheri West, Mumbai 400 061.

Karandikar, Vinda (b.1918) Eminent Marathi poet and academic; has more than 20 books including *Sambita* (poems); translated Aristotle, Goethe and Shakespeare; *Poems of Vinda, Trimurti* and *Some More Poems of Vinda* are available in English; awards and honours include Maharashtra State Award, Soviet Land Nehru Award, Kumaran Asan Prize and Kabir Samman. Add: 7, Anandvan, Sahitya Sahvas, Bandra (E), Mumbai 400 051

Krishnamoorthy, S. Reputed translator from Bengali into Tamil; winner of Rabindra Puraskar of West Bengal Government and many awards from Tamil Nadu for his Tamil translations. Add: 22/24, Monoharpukur Road, Kolkata 700 029.

Krishnanunni P. Critic both in English and Malayalam; writes poetry too; teaches English in a college under Delhi University. Add: 71-D, Pocket-A, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi 110 025.

Kumar, Akshaya Critic in Hindi and English; associated with the Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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Kunhikrishnan, K. Reviews books; retired recently from a senior position in Doordarshan, Prasar Bharati. Add: P1.1. M.S. Flats, Sector – 13, R.K. Puram, New Delhi 110 066.

Maddern, Marian Academician, scholar and translator; translated and edited, with Sibnarayan Ray, a volume of Bengali poetry, *I Have Seen Bengal's Face.* Add: 12 Pleasance Street, Bent Leigh, Victoria 3204, Australia.

Mahakud Pravasini Well-known Oriya poet. Add: 198, Neb Sarai, IGNOU Road, New Delhi 110 068.

Majumder, Mousumi Freelance journalist, based in Allahabad.

Makhija, Anju (b.1948) Indian English writer; has one collection of poetry, one book on multimedia, one collection of essays and one play to her credit; recipient of 2nd Prize in National Education Media Festival, California and Ist Prize in All India Poetry Competition. Add: 5, Prabhat, 'B' Road, Churchgate, Mumbai 400 020.

Mahapatra, K.K. (b.1954) Oriya fiction writer; translates from Oriya to English. Add: 562 I.T. Quarters, 121, N.H. Road, Chennai 600 034.

Mahapatra, Sitakant (b.1937) Well-known Oriya poet, critic and translator. Almost 100 books of his have been published including a few volumes of non-fiction prose in English; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, Soviet Land Nehru Award and Bharatiya Jnanpith Award. Add: 21, Satya Nagar, Bhubaneswar 751 007.

Menon, V.K. Narayana (b.1911-d.1997) Eminent critic of classical Indian and western music in the 1960s and 1970s; worked for BBC during the Second World War and joined AIR in 1958 and became its Director General; besides being Chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi, he held several executive positions in a number of cultural bodies of national and international importance; his translation of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Malayalam classic, *Chemmeen* won Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize in 1990.

Mishra, Chittaranjan Teaches English in a Govt. College at Jeypore, Orissa; has published four books of poetry in Oriya and one in English; regularly writing in Oriya magazines. Add: Department of English, Govt. Women's College, PO: Jeypore, Dist-Koraput, Orissa.

Mishra, Soorya Oriya poet. Add: 895/896, Satya Nagar, Bhubaneswar 751 007, Orissa.

Mitra, Zinia Teaches English in a college under North Bengal University.

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Mukherjee, N.G. Teaches English in a college under Burdwan Unuversity.

Nandakumar, Pratibha Well-known Kannada poet with several volumes of poetry to her credit; represented India in International Poetry Meet in Sweden. Add: 119, Flat 404, Shravanthi Pride 1, 12th A Cross, J.P. Nagar 3rd Phase, Bangalore 560 078.

Narasimhan, Raji (b.1930) Indian English fiction writer and critic. Has six published works to her credit including, *The Sky Changes* (novel), *The Marriage of Bela and Other Stories* etc. Add: B-107, Gulmohar Park, New Delhi 110 049.

Ngangom, Robin S. Writes poetry in English and Manipuri; teaches literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Add: House No. 49, NEHU, Permanent Campus, Umshing, Shillong 793 022, Meghalaya.

Narayan (b.1940) Malayalam fiction-writer; he is the foremost writer from among the tribal people of Kerala; his first novel *Kocharethi* published in 1998 won him several awards including one from the Kerala Sahitya Akademi; has two more novels and a collection of short stories to his credit. Add: 49/689A, Elamakara, Kochi 682 026

Narayan, Badri (b.1965) Hindi poet and critic; has two collections of poetry and one book of literary criticism, *Sanskriti Ka Gadya* to his credit; his poems have been published in many reputed journals and magazines; recipient of Bharat Bhushan Agarwal Award for Young Poets and Banarsi Prasad Bhojpuri Samman; presently associated with G.B.Pant Social Science Institute, Yamuna Vihar, Jhusi, Allahabad 211 019.

Palit, Dibyendu (b.1939) Bengali novelist, short-story writer, poet, journalist, and film and drama critic; his published works include 42 novels, 25 collections of short stories, nine collections of poems and four volumes of essays; recipient of Ananda Puraskar, Ramkumar Bhuwalka Award, Bankim Chandra Memorial Award and Sahitya Akademi Award. Add: Flat 7F-2, Meghamallar, 18/3 Gariahat Road, Kolkata 700 019.

Panda, Durga Prasad (b.1970) Writes poetry, reviews books and translates poetry, both in Oriya and English; has translated into English *The Unreal City and Other Poems* by J.P. Das; associated with many literary forums; recipient of "*Indian Literature* Translation Prize". Add: J.M. Colony, Budharaja, Sambalpur 768004, Orissa.

Panwar, Purabi (b.1946) Academic, critic and translator. Teaching at the

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College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi. Add: 113 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi – 110 049.

Phookan, Nilmani (b.1933) Assamese poet and academic; has more than 15 collections of poetry; edited the weekly *Navyug* and quarterly *Sanjana*; also translated Chinese, Greek, Polish and Spanish poetry into Assamese; awards and honours include Assam State Publication Board's Literary Award, Assam Sahitya Sabha's Raghunath Chaudhury Prize and Sahitya Akademi Award; has been honoured with Padma Shri and is a Fellow of Sahitya Akademi. Add: Bejbarooah Nagar, Maligaon, Guwahati 781 014

Prasad, V. Mohan ('MO') Telugu poet and translator. Add: 303 Rise 'n' View, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 34.

Raghavan, Paa. Tamil short-story writer and novelist; has two short-story collections and one collection of novelettes to his credit; presently associated with *Manasarovar.com*, a large Tamil internet website; recipient of Yuva Lekhak Puraskar by Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Kolkata. Add: Jagat Avenue, 6th Main Road Extension, New Colony, Chromepet, Chennai 600 044.

Rao, D. Kesava (b.1937) Writes in Telugu and English and translates from Telugu to English; has translated G.V. Krishna Rao's *Keelu Bommalu* (Puppets) for Macmillan. Add: 4-2-52 A, Naneppa Nagar, Near Saibaba Nagar, Hindupur 515 202.

Reddy, K. Siva (b.1943) Important Telugu poet; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry for *Mohana! Oh! Mohana!*, Free Verse Front Award for *Raktam Suryudu* etc. Add: 16/2/740/75/40, V.K. Bhaga Nagar, Guddiannaram, Hyderabad 500 660.

Satchidanandan, K. (b.1946) Pioneer in modern and post-modern Malayalam poetry and criticism; has published more than 20 collections of poetry, a collection of one-act plays, a full-length play, 16 collections of translations of poems by Indian and foreign poets, 17 collections of critical essays in Malayalam and English, two plays of Bertolt Brecht in Malayalam translation, a monograph on Nazrul Islam, and edited six collections of poetry (both in Malayalam and English) and two collections of short stories; his works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. Recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Odakkuzhal Award, Gangadhar Meher Award, Kumaran Asan Award etc.; presently working as Secretary, Sahitya Akademi.

Sen, Bhaskar Poet and artist; has two collections of poetry to his credit; held more than six solo shows and ten group shows in Mumbai and New Delhi. Add: 504, Aravali

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Apartments, Kaushambi, Ghaziabad 201 010

Sengupta, Ashis Critic and academician; has published dozens of research papers in Indian and international journals; a Fellow of the Fulbright American Studies Institute, New York, he is Reader in English at the University of North Bengal; recipient of Olive I. Reddick Award.

Sengupta, Mallika (b.1960) Bengali poet and translator; represented India in the International Poetry Festival in Sweden; has published seven collections of poems, two novels and one book of criticism; has also written a number of screen-plays for TV channels. Add: A-66, Siriti Housing Estate, Kolkata 700 041

Seth, Rajee Eminent Hindi novelist and short-story writer; has published four collections of short stories and one novel. Add: M-16, New Delhi 110 017

Singh, T. Bijoy Kumar Writes short stories both in English and Manipuri; also translates from Manipuri to English; an Electrical Engineer by profession. Add: Keishomthong, Top Leirak, Imphal 795 001.

Sreela Teaches English and translates from Malayalam to English; her translation of Malayalam short stories have been published in various journals. Add: Dept. of English, N.S.S. College, Nenmara, Pallakkad Dt., Kerala.

Sridhar, M. (b.1962) Teaches English at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad 500 046; translates from Telugu to English and English to Telugu; recipient of Jyestha Literary Award and the Katha Commendation Prize for Translation jointly with Alladi Uma.

Subramaniam, Arundhati Indian English poet and presenter of cultural events; works with the National Council for Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai. Add: National Centre for Performing Arts, NCPA Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400 021.

Swain, Rabindra K. (b.1960) Indian English poet with two collections of poems to his credit; translates from Oriya into English; associated with Jayanta Mahapatra's reputed poetry magazine *Chandrabhaga*; teaches at the Gopabandhu Academy of Administration, Chandrasekharpur, Bhubaneswar 751 023.

Thiyam, Saratchand (b.1961) Manipuri poet; has published five books of poetry and two travelogues; his poems have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal. Add: Sagolband Lukram Leirak, Imphal 795 001, Manipur.

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Tulasi, Anubhav (b.1958) Assamese poet and translator; has three collections of poems to his credit; has been translated into several Indian languages and English; has also translated poems of Anna Akhmatova, Georgos Seferis and Mirza Ghalib into Assamese. Add: Jayanagar, Maligaon, Guwahati 781 011.

Uma, Alladi Teaches English at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad 500 046; translates from Telugu to English and English to Telugu; recipient of Jyestha Literary Award and the Katha Commendation Prize for Translation jointly with M. Sridhar.

Verma, Anoop (b.1966) Indian English short-story writer and novelist; has one novel, *A Thread of Life* to his credit. Add: A 67/1, DDA (SFS) Flat, Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

Vijayalakshmi, M. (b.1948) Translates from Tamil and Hindi into English; associated with Sahitya Akademi as its Librarian.

Wright, Carolyne A widely published American poet and translator. In addition to her translation of Bengali women poets, done under a 1986-87 Indo-American Fellowship for advanced research and a 1989-90 Fulbright Scholarship to Bangladesh, she is known for her translation of the Chilean poet Jorge Teillier. She has published a book of translation of Bengali women poets. She lives in the United States.

Yadav, Ram Kishore Graduate from College of Art, New Delhi, served as an Art Executive in D.A.V.P. Govt. of India, New Delhi; held more than 45 solo shows in India, a dozen abroad and 35 group-shows; winner of several prestigious awards, prizes and fellowships. Add: A/47-B, DDA Flats, Munirka, New Delhi 110 067.

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